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# 24D

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

MORAL DEVELOPMENT AS AN EDUCATIONAL AIM  
WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE  
TO THE VIEWS  
OF  
REINHOLD NIEBUHR

by

FRANCIS WILLIAM SAMIS

A THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA  
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Moral Development as an Educational Aim with Particular Reference to the Views of Reinhold Niebuhr", submitted by Francis William Samis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



## ABSTRACT

In this study of moral development as an educational aim, the particular reference to Reinhold Niebuhr has the twofold effect of delimiting the area of investigation and stating the problem. To confine the study to Niebuhr's views is to define Christianity and related terms as "according to Niebuhr." It is his understanding of Christian belief regarding the nature and destiny of man that is under discussion. As Niebuhr's underlying theme is that there are resources in the Christian faith which have been lost to the modern world and need to be recovered, investigation of this proposition as it relates to education becomes the explicit aim of the study. Implicit in the study is the question whether the relationship between modern thought and the prophetic-Biblical faith, and hence between secular education and the Christian Church is necessarily antagonistic, and whether separation of church and school, otherwise than from the standpoint of function, is necessarily either inevitable or desirable. Although he does not deal with education directly, Niebuhr does, nevertheless, explore the possibilities of just such a positive relationship in his exposition of the relevance of the Christian faith to modern life. This emphasis of Niebuhr of necessity determines the trend of the dissertation, placing the emphasis not upon educational techniques, but upon goals and policies.

The point at which Niebuhr finds the secular school most vulnerable and inadequate is its total dependence upon and reflection of a secular society whose norms are political morality and mutuality. The altruism necessary to the transcendence of these prudential moralities, while it is found in many places, is the characteristic, central moral emphasis of most branches of the Christian Church. Although imperfectly expressed in the churches, this altruism is consistently emphasized, and draws its inspiration from a point of reference beyond political organizations and social groups. As a way of life, it derives from agape, the distinctively Christian concept of love. In a world of aggressive philosophies and ideologies, a secular educational system, whatever the good intentions of its designers, inevitably will succumb to social pressures and reflect dominant ideologies. The Christian Church, in its various branches, and with varying emphasis, seeks to maintain the dignity, integrity and individual worth of man in the face of such ideologies.





The secular school is in the dilemma of being the only stable social agency with which many students have contact, and being charged with a task for which its resources are inadequate. The needed gospel of agape is not inherent in secularism. The Church, whose gospel is agape, is cut off from the school.

After investigating moral development as an educational aim, with special attention to the views of Niebuhr, the writer of the dissertation comes to the conclusion that cooperation between church and school is both necessary and possible. It need not involve domination of one by the other. While many considerations make separation of function wise and necessary, it is possible, nevertheless, through thoughtful and tolerant leadership to ensure that Judaeo-Christian culture is accorded appropriate emphasis and representation in the curriculum. The secular school need not be a pagan school. The school can be strengthened further in its work of moral development by the influence of teachers whose outlook and way of life are in sympathy with the Christian concept of altruism. Persons with the prophetic-Biblical view of the nature and destiny of man are particularly well-qualified to exert constructive influence as counselors. Thus, the solution of this problem really depends upon the personal qualities of those who staff the educational system as curriculum makers, teachers and counsellors.



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F. W. S.





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## CHAPTER I

### PURPOSE, ORIENTATION AND PLAN OF WORK

#### Purpose

Implicit in the topic "Moral Development as an Educational Aim, with Particular Reference to the Views of Reinhold Niebuhr" is the problem posed by Niebuhr's interpretation of life in terms of Christian faith. This raises a many-sided question as to the relationship of Christianity to education. Should Christian teaching and influence be an effective and vital factor in the educational process? Can it be this? Is the Christian gospel essential to moral development? Does it supply needed insights and techniques not available elsewhere? If Christian influence is deemed necessary, or even desirable, on what terms? How can it be related effectively to the work of the secular school?

#### Orientation

One cannot go further without clarification of terms. By "educational aims" is meant the educational aims of schools. It is recognized that education is an aspect of all life, and is especially a function of the home. The problem investigated in this dissertation, however, is that of moral development as an educational aim in the school setting. Likewise, such words as "Christian," and related and derived terms have a specific connotation. It is Christianity "according to Niebuhr" that is under discussion. While it is recognized that there are other expressions of the Christian faith that may be called representative and contemporary, Niebuhr's views are both broadly representative and current. Thus, to study Niebuhr's definitive work, The Nature and Destiny of Man<sup>1</sup>, is to delimit the problem.

#### Plan

Indeed, this is the plan of work: to examine Niebuhr's interpretation

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943. The two volumes of this work are also referred to by their individual titles, Human Nature and Human Destiny.



of the Christian faith in Human Nature and Human Destiny, with a supplementary reference to Moral Man and Immoral Society<sup>1</sup>, to note what, in Niebuhr's view, are the Christian essentials, and to ask concerning each of these, such questions as "Is this necessary to moral development?" "Is this helpful?" "How might this be related to education?"

As Niebuhr did not address himself directly to the problems of education, it is necessary to infer and elicit the applications of his ideas to moral development as an educational aim. When it is kept in mind, though, that it is educational aims that are under investigation, it becomes evident that those concepts and goals which, in Niebuhr's view, are the great Christian concepts and goals of life, will be, for him the Christian criteria of education.

An underlying and normative consideration, of course, is that of human need, social and individual. What does society require of the individual in the interests of communal well-being? What are the needs of the individual, psychologically considered? An attempt at adequacy in answering these questions, finds one rephrasing them into such terms as "What is Man?" and "What is his Fulfillment?" The over-riding interest, then, and the concern of this thesis, is neither in classroom techniques nor administrative policies, but in the ultimate goals towards which these should be oriented. It is Niebuhr's answer to these basic questions that is being sought.

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.





## CHAPTER II

### REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S VIEW

#### Orientation

Reinhold Niebuhr's view is that "there are resources in the Christian faith for an understanding of human nature which have been lost in modern culture."<sup>1</sup> His conviction is that these lost resources can and must be regained. His belief is that, without them, individual human beings cannot stand up to life, and human social institutions are inevitably corrupted. He suggests that while no belief about the nature of things can alter that same "nature of things," beliefs do affect man's ability to cope with life, and his manner of doing so.

No philosophy or religion can change the structure of human existence. That structure involves individuality in terms of both the natural fact of a particular body and the spiritual fact of self-transcendence. But religions and philosophies have an important bearing upon the possibility of the ego, maintaining itself in such a position of transcendence.<sup>2</sup>

Modern philosophies misunderstand and misinterpret human nature because of extreme positions, either idealistic or naturalistic. To over-stress either man's rational faculties or his nature as a physical organism is to overlook the interdependence of these two aspects and to miss altogether the dimension of "spirit" which stands in such intimate relation to the physical. The modern failure lies in seeking to explain either in intellectual or biological terms that "which can be understood only as aspects of that curious compound of 'nature' and 'spirit' which all human behavior manifests."<sup>3</sup>

Niebuhr's view is that all modern philosophies of human nature are derivatives, adaptations and compounds of two underlying interpretations of man: the classical and the Biblical. These two distinct and contrasting

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943, Vol. I, Human Nature, p.vii.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.69.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp.vii-viii.





streams actually were merged in the medieval Thomistic synthesis of Augustinian and Aristotelian thought. The disintegration of this synthesis came in the mutually contradictory developments of the Renaissance and Reformation. In this dissolution, the classical elements were projected into modern life in the context of the Renaissance, while the Reformation sought the purification and renewal of the Biblical tradition. As the gulf between Renaissance and Reformation widened in modern thought, liberal Protestantism sought abortively to effect a reunion.

Niebuhr believes there is really little common ground between classical and Biblical views. With the modern reinterpretation of the classical view of man in the direction of greater naturalism, the common ground becomes even less.

Modern culture has thus been a battleground of two opposing views of human nature. This conflict could not be resolved. It ended in a more or less complete triumph of the modernized classical view of man, a triumph which in this latter day is imperilled not by any external foe but by confusion within its own household.<sup>1</sup>

#### The Classical View of Man<sup>2</sup>

The classical view of man, wedded for a time to the Biblical view in the Thomistic synthesis, has re-emerged, through the Renaissance, as the basis and forerunner of modern secular philosophy. This is, of course, a situation of pluralism. There is no one "classical view" just as there is no one "modern view." There are, rather, a great number of divergent and contradictory ideas in juxtaposition in both classical and modern thinking. The expressions "classical view" and "modern view" are collective terms, comprehending various contradictory as well as complementary items.

Heading the list of classical ideas influential in modern thought, Niebuhr gives priority to the Greek metaphysical presuppositions of the separation of mind and body. Despite their differences, Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic teaching set forth the common view that man's unique feature is his rational faculty, his nous or capacity for reason. This is clearly distinguished from body. A further presupposition of Greek philosophy was the assumed identity between being and reason, with the added thought that reason works on formless stuff, which it

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 5.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 4-12.



is never able completely to bring into submission.

The effect of this rationalism and dualism of Plato and Aristotle on modern thought has been twofold. Firstly, rationalism practically identifies rational man with the divine. Secondly, dualism identifies the body with evil, assuming the essential goodness of mind or spirit. Thus individuality is not a significant concept, resting as it does upon the particularity of the body. While Stoicism is monistic and pantheistic, and Stoic reason is more immanent, man remains essentially reason for this school also.

Modern vitalism and romanticism hark back to classical origins in Heraclitus, and particularly to the Dionysians, both in religion and drama, while modern naturalism and materialism have their antecedents in Democritus and Epicurus. These two latter saw man as wholly a part of nature, governed by an immanent reason reduced to mechanical necessity. "It was by combining Stoic with Democritan and Epicurean naturalism that modern culture arrived at concepts which were to express some of its most characteristic interpretations of man as primarily a child of nature."<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr, who is quite critical of modern man's good opinion of himself, thinks that there is little ground for this optimism in either classical or Christian thought.

It must be observed that while the classical view of human virtue is optimistic compared with the Christian view (for it finds no defect in the centre of human personality) and while it has perfect confidence in the virtue of the rational man, it does not share the confidence of the moderns in the ability of all men to be either virtuous or happy. Thus an air of melancholy hangs over Greek life which stands in sharpest contrast to the all-pervasive optimism of the now dying bourgeois culture, despite the assumption of the latter that it had merely restored the classical world view and the Greek view of man.<sup>2</sup>

Classical pessimism was deepened by the lack of any idea of meaning in history. History was thought to be cyclical. This, linked to mind-body dualism, culminated in the conviction that the body was a tomb to be escaped. Greek tragedy, too, dwelt upon man's hopeless plight. Unlike Christianity, however, it suggested no answer. The heroes of Greek tragedy

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 9.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid.





inevitably pass from creativity to prideful defiance of the principles of order and measure as represented by Zeus and go down to mortal destruction as Nemesis overtakes them.

Thus life is at war with itself, according to Greek tragedy. There is no solution, or only a tragic solution for the conflict between the vitalities of life and the principle of measure. Zeus remains God. But one is prompted to both admiration and pity toward those who defy him. It is significant that this profound problem, posed by Greek tragedy, was never sensed by the moderns who revived classicism and ostensibly built their view of man upon Greek thought. They may have understood or misunderstood Plato or Aristotle; but the message of Aeschylus and Sophocles was neither understood nor misunderstood. It was simply neglected except as the minor romantic note in modern culture appreciated and partly misunderstood.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Niebuhr sees the modern view of human nature as deeply indebted, by way of the Renaissance, to Greek ideas about man. From this classical tradition have come such divergent concepts as belief in the essential goodness of mind or spirit, the evil of the body, the goodness of the universal, the evil of particularity, Dionysian vitalism, Heraclitan, Democritan and Epicurean naturalism and materialism, all deeply permeated by a spirit of melancholy and a sense of life's ultimate futility. It is important to keep in mind that these are ideas from the classical tradition. Their bearing upon moral standards and human behavior reflects the thought and life of men foreign to the Biblical tradition.

#### The Modern View of Man: Confused

The modern view of man is a "curious compound of classical, Christian and distinctively modern conceptions of human nature. . . ."<sup>2</sup> The classical element is more of Epicurean and Democritan naturalism than of Platonic or Aristotelian rationalism. This modern naturalism is in harmony with the Christian concept of man as "creature," but contradicts the idea of "image of God" which the early Renaissance emphasized in opposition to ideas of man as creature and sinner.

The modern view of man has resulted in three great confusions as to man's nature, his individuality and his goodness. Niebuhr categorizes these "various difficulties and confusions" as:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 11-12. <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 18.





(a) The inner contradictions in modern conceptions of human nature between idealistic and naturalistic rationalists; and between rationalists, whether idealistic or naturalistic, and vitalists and romanticists. (b) The certainties about human nature in modern culture which modern history dissipates, particularly the certainty about individuality. (c) The certainties about human nature, particularly the certainty about the goodness of man, which stands in contradiction to the known facts of history.<sup>1</sup>

### Contradictory Conceptions of Human Nature

Niebuhr describes the inner contradictions in modern conceptions of human nature as a conflict between idealistic rationalists and naturalistic rationalists and again as a controversy between all rationalists, either idealistic or naturalistic on the one hand and vitalists and romanticists on the other.<sup>2</sup>

As the idealists and naturalists confront and contradict one another, the idealists protest against Christian humility, disavowing man's creatureliness and sinfulness. This was the mood of the Renaissance, determined by Platonism, neo-Platonism and Stoicism. Bruno stressed the infinity of human self-consciousness; da Vinci sought to prove mathematical method a fruit and symbol of the greatness of the human mind; Petrarch saw nature as a mirror reflecting man's true greatness. Yet in Francis Bacon and Montaigne there was a minor note of interest in nature, leading on to the naturalistic rationalism of the eighteenth century. So early Renaissance Platonism turned into the Stoicism of Descartes and Spinoza and the seventeenth century, emerging in the eighteenth as a radical materialistic, Democritan naturalism. Thus develops modern man's attempt to understand himself in terms of his relation to nature.

While seeking to understand himself in naturalistic terms, however, modern man became thoroughly confused about the relation of reason to nature and to men. This confusion is best seen in the thought of the French Enlightenment. German idealism was a reaction to this naturalistic

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Explanation of these terms in the sense that Niebuhr uses them follows in subsequent sections.



trend, while Descartes attempted to bridge the gap by conceiving of man purely in terms of thought and of nature in terms of mechanics, with no organic unity of the two. In this, says Niebuhr, Descartes bore "within himself both the contradictions and extravagances of modernity".<sup>1</sup>

These changing and contradictory views of human nature are closely related to, and indeed reflect, the full cycle of bourgeois man's break-away from the confining and yet supportive structures of medievalism out into the illusory freedoms of exploitative capitalism, only to find himself even more deeply enmeshed in the toils of modern industrial society. In one mood of this modern confusion, man believes naively that nature's pre-established order will automatically keep him within such limits as to prevent serious catastrophe. All is enfolded in nature, so all is well. Romantic naturalists, on the other hand, reject both reason and nature as keys to man's makeup, interpreting human nature in vitalistic terms. They naively expect to find a rational coherence of life with life, already existent and waiting only to be revealed. but end with the bitter frustration of a coherence arbitrarily and violently imposed from without, as in fascism.

#### The Certainty about Individuality

Niebuhr sees confusion in modern thinking about man's individuality. Modern culture entertains certainties about individuality which are dissipated by modern history. The modern belief in individuality is a delusion. Individuality, he claims, is really a Christian idea, and can be maintained only upon a basis of Christian presuppositions. Otherwise it is lost, and ideas of man's worth and dignity founded upon it likewise are lost because they are, in literal truth, baseless. In other words, modern man deludes himself when he thinks he possesses individuality.

The modern idea of individuality was enunciated by Renaissance thinkers and based ostensibly and falsely upon a return to classicism. Actually it is of Christian and bourgeois derivation. Niebuhr discusses the relationship of the idea to each of these three sources in turn: classicism, the bourgeois revolution, and Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Human Nature, p.20. <sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp.21-23.





It may be commented that if modern man's idea of himself as an individual is not true to the facts, there are far-reaching moral implications. Without individuality, questions of moral development take on a totally different aspect, obviously unrecognized by those who speak of the ideal possibility of man operating autonomously.

#### The Certainty about the Goodness of Man

Another modern "certainty" about human nature which Niebuhr sees as standing in contradiction to the known facts of history is the "certainty" about man's goodness.<sup>1</sup> The point of common agreement amongst conflicting schools of modern thought is that all have an essentially easy conscience. The Christian idea of man's sinfulness is regarded as irrelevant, a more telling criticism than that of incredibility. Modern rationalism finds evil in involvement in nature and redemption in the increase of rational faculties as a means of bringing freedom from the bonds and fetters of nature. Modern naturalism, on the other hand, seeks to restore man to the harmonies of nature by rescuing him from the chaos of spiritual life. In neither of these solutions is there the hint of a troubled conscience. It is simply that man must rise from the chaos of nature to the harmony of mind, or descend from the chaos of spirit to the unity of nature. Niebuhr thinks that these contradictions and confusions point up how far man actually is from solving the problem of evil.

Another expression of modern optimism is the idea of progress. The inevitable upward trend is variously attributed to a force immanent in nature, the gradual extension of rationality, or the elimination of specific source of evil, such as priesthoods. The idea of progress, however, is tenable only in a culture grounded upon Hebraic-Christian beliefs, with a world view based upon Christian apocalypse and Hebrew

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-25.





philosophy of meaningful history.<sup>1</sup> Greek ideas of history will not support the idea of progress, for the Greeks regarded history as meaningless. In discarding the Christian doctrine of sin, moderns see progress as closely related to biological process. This fails either to do justice to man's unique freedom or to the demonic use he makes of it.

Niebuhr notes that, while the mechanistic naturalist Hobbes, the romantic naturalist Nietzsche, and Freud all are pessimistic, they do have, nevertheless, no uneasy conscience. Egotism and the will to power are both normal and normative. Hobbes' cynicism and Nietzsche's nihilism have done much to complicate and confuse modern man's view of himself. The solution of modern bourgeois liberalism is a new education which will enable man to slough off these defects.

### The Christian View of Man

#### The Question of Presuppositions

Every human thought system has its basic assumptions, its presuppositions or postulates. The Christian view of man is determined by the ultimate presuppositions of the Christian faith. The first of these, in Niebuhr's thinking, is faith in God.

The Christian faith in God as Creator of the world transcends the canons and antinomies of rationality, particularly the antinomy between mind and matter, between consciousness and extension. God is not merely mind who forms a previously given formless stuff. God is both vitality and form and the source of all existence. He creates the world. This world is not God; but it is not evil because it is not God. Being God's creation, it is good.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr's point here seems to be that, in the modern world view, based upon evolutionary theory, there is actually no inherent guarantee of progress. While the evolutionary process involves continuous adaptation and change, who is to say that this is progress? Progress towards what? The idea of meaningful progress in history has Hebraic-Christian origins. That modern man may be unaware of the origin of his assumption does not alter the case. When he does realize his implicit dependence upon the Hebraic-Christian world view, if he rejects this, he finds himself with an idea of progress for which he has no justification. This leads to pessimism and despair.

<sup>2</sup> Human Nature, p. 12.



Niebuhr admits at once the difficulty of trying to explain an ultra-rational presupposition in rational terms. In its attempts to achieve rational coherence, reason tends to make itself the principle of explanation. This has the effect of making reason God. This tendency in Christian thinking, says Niebuhr, "explains why naturalists plausibly though erroneously regard Christian faith as the very fountain source of idealism."<sup>1</sup>

From these assumptions concerning the existence and nature of God, which may be taken as the ultimate presuppositions of Christianity, are elicited certain derived positions, subsidiary (secondary) postulates, as it were, concerning the nature of man. The first of these expresses

an appreciation of the unity of body and soul in human personality which idealists and naturalists have sought in vain. Furthermore, it prevents the idealistic error of regarding mind as essentially good or essentially eternal and the body as essentially evil. But it also obviates the romantic error of seeking for the good in man-as-nature and for evil in man-as-spirit or as reason.<sup>2</sup>

The Biblical view of man, according to Niebuhr's explanation, is monist. This monism is not held because of an undeveloped psychology, or because of a situation such as existed in Greek thought before Anaxagoras, with no clear-cut differentiation between physis, psyche and nous. Biblical monism "is ultimately derived from the Biblical view of God as the Creator and of the Biblical faith in the goodness of the creation."<sup>3</sup> Even though, in Hebrew language, two words for "breath" become differentiated until ruach is "roughly synonymous with spirit or nous and nephesh with soul or psyche, . . . unlike Greek thought, this distinction does not lead to dualistic consequences."<sup>4</sup>

A second derived concept of the nature of man, elicited logically from the ultimate Christian postulate of God as creator, is the assumption that man is to be understood "primarily from the standpoint of God." It is not man's unique intelligence nor his obvious place in the natural order but the "image of God" within him that is the key to his nature. He, too, is both involved in and yet stands above nature and his own involvement.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 12-13. <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 12. <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 13. <sup>4</sup>Ibid.





The human spirit has the special capacity of standing continually outside itself in terms of indefinite regression. Consciousness is a capacity for surveying the world and determining action from a governing centre. Self-consciousness represents a further degree of transcendence in which the self makes itself its own object in such a way that the ego is finally always subject and not object. The rational capacity of surveying the world, of forming general concepts and analyzing the order of the world is thus but one aspect of what Christianity knows as 'spirit.' The self knows the world, insofar as it knows the world, because it stands outside both itself and the world, which means that it cannot understand itself except as it is understood from beyond itself and the world.<sup>1</sup>

This essential homelessness of the human spirit is the ground of all religion; for the self which stands outside itself and the world cannot find the meaning of life in itself or the world. It cannot identify meaning with causality in nature; for its freedom is obviously something different from the necessary causal links of nature. Nor can it identify the principle of meaning with rationality, since it transcends its own rational processes, so that it may, for instance, ask the question whether there is a relevance between its rational forms and the recurrences and forms of nature. It is this capacity of freedom which finally prompts great cultures and philosophies to transcend rationalism and seek for the meaning of life in an unconditioned ground of existence. But from the standpoint of human thought this unconditioned ground of existence, this God, can be defined only negatively.<sup>2</sup>

#### Complex Questions Require Adequate Answers

Having derived the understanding of human nature from the postulate of God, Niebuhr then seems to reverse the process and argue back from the transcendence of human spirit to the necessity of God. Is this arguing in a circle? If man's ability to transcend himself were a derivative from the postulate of God as creator, argument in a circle would seem to be the case. But the transcendence of human spirit is not a logical derivative of belief in God. This self transcendence is an empirical fact of human experience calling for an adequate explanation. The adequate explanation is achieved by assuming God as creator and eliciting the concept of man as "image of God" from this initial assumption.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. , pp. 13-14.    <sup>2</sup> Ibid. , p. 14.





A distinction is drawn at this point between Christianity and mystical religions. While the latter share with Christianity the common characteristic of measuring the depth of human personality in terms of the capacity for self-transcendence, they differ in that mysticism leads to undifferentiated ultimate reality, regarding particularity and individuality as evil, whereas Christianity enhances individuality.

God as will and personality, in concepts of Christian faith, is thus the only possible ground of real individuality, though not the only possible presupposition of self-consciousness. But faith in God as will and personality depends upon faith in His power to reveal Himself. The Christian faith in God's self-disclosure, culminating in the revelation of Christ, is thus the basis of the Christian concept of personality and individuality. In terms of this faith, man can understand himself as a unity of will which finds its end in the will of God.<sup>1</sup>

The basic Christian assumptions, as Niebuhr sees them, are to be gauged and adopted with a criterion in mind that underlies his thought: the principle of adequacy. At this point it will suffice to note that Niebuhr's argument is that in the Christian explanation of life there is the necessary adequacy to account for the human situation and to meet human need in coping with life. It escapes the peril of inadequacy, enforced mistakenly in the name of parsimony.

To understand himself truly means to begin with a faith that he is understood from beyond himself, that he is known and loved of God and must find himself in terms of obedience to the divine will. This relation of the divine to the human will makes it possible for man to relate himself to God without pretending to be God; and to accept his distance from God as a created thing, without believing that the evil of his nature is caused by this finiteness. Man's finite existence in the body and in history can be essentially affirmed, as naturalism wants to affirm it. Yet the uniqueness of man's spirit can be appreciated even more than idealism appreciates it, though always preserving a proper distinction between the human and the divine. Also the unity of spirit and body can be emphasized in terms of its relation to a Creator and Redeemer who created both mind and body. These are the ultra-rational foundations and presuppositions of Christian wisdom about man.<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr thus contends that these ultra-rational presuppositions constitute the necessary minimum upon which an adequate and workable

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 15.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 15-16.





philosophy of human life and behavior can be based. The values of both naturalism and idealism are conserved while avoiding the extravagances resulting from excessive or exclusive emphasis upon either of these aspects of human experience.

It should be observed, too, that a significant feature of Niebuhr's statement of Christian assumptions is the stress on a human need that calls for adequate satisfaction, a need unique to man, a spiritual hunger, restlessness, anxiety, longing and questing. The complexity of human personality is such that too simple explanations simply do not explain.

### Faith and Revelation<sup>1</sup>

The key to an appreciation and awareness of God is in human nature itself. Here is a dimension of depth and height not found in nature, and not encompassed by intellect, which is only a part of human nature. While man is imbedded in nature and has intelligence as an attribute, his distinctively human characteristic, manifested in his capacity for self-transcending objectivity, elicits an intimation of God and is the start of a tangent leading out from the human to the divine.

In addition to man's unique inner dimension, there is in nature an "irrational givenness," a quality of randomness which eludes classification in a closed system of cause and effect. These two aspects, the one of human nature and the other of physical nature lead man to look for intimations of meaning and purpose in life not adequately comprehended in the explanation of rationalistic naturalism in categories either of pragmatism, experimentalism or logical positivism. Niebuhr comments,

To reject the principle of natural causation as the final principle of interpreting the unity of the world is not to interpret the world merely from the standpoint of man's internal problem or to read psychic attributes of man into nature. The fact is, that the relation of things to each other in the chain of natural causation is not an adequate explanation of their givenness. This irrational givenness must be regarded either as merely chance or caprice, or the order of the world must be related to a more ultimate realm of freedom. There is, in other words, a gain for an adequate cosmology, if man uses concepts in his interpretations of the cosmos which he won first of all in measuring the dimension of his own internal reality. Even nature is better understood if it is measured by the structure of human consciousness, and by the experience of a reality more ultimate than his own, which impinges upon his freedom.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The material of this section is based upon Human Nature, chap. v.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 134.



The avenues of approach to these phenomena of inner depth and outer randomness are faith and revelation. Here one does not expect to achieve the comprehension of understanding so much as the apprehension of awareness, with adequate insights to cope with the problems of life.

In discussing the nature of revelation<sup>1</sup>, Niebuhr says, in effect, that our inability to "know all" about God does not mean that we cannot know "enough." This is the basis of Biblical revelation described as prophetic and apocalyptic. To explain these terms, Niebuhr quotes John Oman's The Natural and The Supernatural<sup>2</sup> where the distinction is drawn between the mystical religion which "seeks the eternal behind the illusion of the evanescent" and apocalyptic "any religion which looks for a revealing in the evanescent." This is to equate "apocalyptic" with "prophetic" religion, instead of confining the former to its more limited connotation of an expected catastrophic revelation.<sup>3</sup>

The difference is stressed between Christianity as a religion of revelation and religions based on mysticism. The practical outcomes of mysticism are social inertia and loss of individuality. On the other hand, Christianity as a religion of revelation, offers a coherent pattern of working assumptions about life and its meaning that are validated as they are acted upon. Niebuhr's argument is, essentially, that the Christian hypotheses about life are adequate, are based on reality and are self-validating. When they are acted upon, they are seen to be more than assumptions. They correspond to man's needs and fit the realities of life as he finds it. They work as nothing else works. It is through this process of proving, or self-validation that the assumptions of faith lead on to the verities of revelation.

In this Christian view, God is transcendent and yet intimately related to the world. Man is both free and finite. Man's life is good and yet he remains a needy sinner. To accept or believe this is not to give intellectual assent to the credibility of a series of incredible propositions;

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., chap. v.

<sup>2</sup> John Oman, op. cit., pp. 403-409, as quoted in Human Nature, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> Human Nature, p. 126.





it is to choose and accept a way of life that is explained and inspired by certain events in history and proven by living. The fact that these principles of life are regarded as established does not mean that they are no longer open to testing or validation. They become useful to man only as he does test and prove them. "The finite world is not, because of its finiteness, incapable of entertaining comprehensible revelations of the incomprehensible God."<sup>1</sup>

#### Individual (General) Revelation

Niebuhr sees a two-fold classification in the revelation of God to man: one individual and the other social-historical. These are mutually supporting. Of the first named, he writes: "Private revelation is the testimony in the consciousness of every person that his life touches a reality beyond himself, a reality deeper and higher than the system of nature in which he stands."<sup>2</sup>

While this is private it is at the same time general. It is a common human experience. Niebuhr writes: "The experience of God is not so much a separate experience, as an overtone implied in all experience. The soul which reaches the outmost rim of its own consciousness, must also come in contact with God, for He impinges upon that consciousness."<sup>3</sup>

Mentioning various forms this experience may take, including Schleiermacher's feeling of "unqualified dependence," Paul's description of the commonplace sense of God (Rom. 1:20), and Job's protest at the uncomfortable presence of God (Job 7:16-21), Niebuhr underlines as typical the testimony of the Psalmist (Psa. 139) as to "the sense of being seen, commanded, judged and known from beyond ourselves."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 126.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>3</sup>Human Nature, p. 127.    <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 128.



The experience so described is in some sense identical or associated with what is usually called 'conscience.' The actual nature of conscience is, of course, variously defined in various philosophies. It may be regarded as the social obligations and judgments which all men must face. Or it may be defined as the obligation and judgment under which the rational or intelligible self places the empirical, the sensible or the partial self. The significance of the Biblical interpretation of conscience lies precisely in this, that a universal human experience, the sense of being commanded, placed under obligation and judged is interpreted as a relation between God and man in which it is God who makes demands and judgments upon man. Such an interpretation of a common experience is not possible without the presuppositions of the Biblical faith. But once accepted the assumption proves to be the only basis of a correct analysis of all the factors involved in the experience; for it is a fact that man is judged and yet there is no vantage point in his own life, sufficiently transcendent, from which the judgment can take place. St. Paul describes the three levels of judgment under which men stand, and the relativity of all but the last level in the words: 'But to me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment; yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord.' (1 Cor. 4:3-4)<sup>1</sup>

#### Niebuhr's Argument Reviewed

Niebuhr's method of argument should be noted again. To interpret the sense of being commanded as a relationship between God and man is, initially, an assumption. When put to the test, he claims, it proves to be the basis for a correct interpretation of human experience. Thus an interpretation in the light of faith, when tested, leads to a disclosure, or revelation of the nature of things. The final test would appear to be a pragmatic one. Other outcomes are possible but none so beneficial.

Applied to the Pauline test (1 Cor. 4: 3-4), the argument is that there are three standards of judgment for moral behavior: social, personal and religious. If I look to men, my standards will be both relativistic and corrupted; if I look to myself, through self-excusing and rationalization I will condone my own actions and be less than objective. Only in reference to the will of God will I find objectivity and direction.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 128-129. The Biblical quotation is A. V.







To say, as Niebuhr does,<sup>1</sup> that personal experience is reinforced by historical experience, while historical revelation is illumined and validated in turn by individual revelation is to argue in a circle. Niebuhr's reply is that all human experience requires more than the immediate experience to establish its nature. The mutual individual and social interplay is necessary to understanding.

When the reality experienced ceases to be mere object and itself becomes subject, the principle of experience involved becomes something more than that of mere knowledge. It becomes revelation. An analagous situation obtains when a friend communicates with one instead of remaining a mere organism of whom one is aware. "In the same way, the God whom we meet as "The Other" at the final limit of our own consciousness, is not fully known to us except as special revelations of His character augment this general experience of being confronted from beyond ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

#### How the Doctrine of Creation Supports Revelation

Niebuhr argues that "the Biblical doctrine of the Creator, and the world as His creation is, in itself, not a doctrine of revelation, but it is basic for the doctrine of revelation."<sup>3</sup> The cosmological argument, rightly used, does not rest simply on the assumption that the reality of God can be proved from the contingent and dependent character of all finite being, with the logical implication of a Creator. The creation does not prove the Creator, but points to a God already known in moral experience and whose transcendent character is inferred from the quality, height and depth of man's own consciousness. That is to say: the mystery of creation is illumined by man's own experiences of conscience and consciousness.

The mythical and supra-rational form in which the idea of creation is expressed, the figure of the potter and his clay, preserves the idea of God's freedom and transcendence in opposition to the "first cause" of rationalistic naturalism or the form-giving nous of idealism. The Biblical idea is of a free and transcendent God in intimate relation to the world. The Biblical scheme stresses the goodness of creation and the meaningfulness of human history. History is not meaningless because

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 129.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 130.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 133.



it is in the flux of nature and man is not evil because he is an organism. The idea that physical life is evil is not a Biblical idea, but is the error of the rationalists, who make nous the ultimate principle of meaning and divide man into essentially good reason and essentially evil physical life.

Here, again, the difference must be made clear between Biblical religion and mysticism (the only other system with the dimension of depth). Mysticism regards its nous and logos as finite, and seeks undifferentiated unity as the ultimate good. This is sought introversively in a unity of consciousness on a level above sense and reason. To attain this is to attain the divine. As opposed to Biblical concepts, in mysticism God is negative, the world is illusory or evil and man is provisionally eligible for and capable of deification. "The Biblical doctrine of Creator and creation is thus the only ground upon which the full height of the human spirit can be measured, the unity of its life in body and soul be maintained and the essential meaningfulness of its history in the finite world asserted, and a limit set for its freedom, and self-transcendence."<sup>1</sup> That is to say, the Biblical doctrine of creation is necessary as a basis of interpreting human nature adequately and truthfully, all of which is fundamental to a theory of moral development.

#### Social-Historical (Special) Revelation

Man's moral situation, in Niebuhr's view, is falsified and incomplete without the objective point of reference of historical revelations. Without the latter, man's experience of conscience becomes reduced to the explanation of man facing the court of social approval or the judgment of his own best self. In this subjective situation he always excuses himself, claiming, as Paul put it, to know nothing against himself.<sup>2</sup> "But this conclusion is at variance with the actual facts of the human situation, for there is no level of moral achievement upon which man can have or actually has an easy conscience."<sup>3</sup> This, again, is Niebuhr's argument of adequacy. In terms of moral nature man is built "larger" than any naturalistic explanation can account for. The historic revelation in Christ, once accepted as such, provides an answer to man's moral need and is adequate to his stature. It is

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 136.    <sup>2</sup>I Cor. 4:4.    <sup>3</sup>Human Nature, p. 131.





validated in experience. This, contends Niebuhr, has been demonstrated many times in history.

The fact that a culture which identifies God with some level of human consciousness, either rational or super-rational, or with some order of nature, invariably falsifies the human situation and fails to appreciate either the total stature of freedom in man or the complexity of the problem of evil in him, is the most telling negative proof for the Biblical faith. Man does not know himself truly except as he knows himself confronted by God. Only in that confrontation does he become aware of his full stature and freedom and of the evil in him. It is for this reason that Biblical faith is of such importance for the proper understanding of man, and why it is necessary to correct the interpretations of human nature which underestimate his stature, depreciate his physical existence and fail to deal realistically with the evil in human nature, in terms of Biblical faith.<sup>1</sup>

This puts Niebuhr's theory of moral development unequivocally upon a religious basis. Is he not saying that, while there may be, and are, other moralities, the only one which deals truthfully and realistically with human nature and the human situation is grounded in religious experience, and not only religious experience in general, but religious experience in Christian terms?

Writing on "Historical and Special Revelation,"<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr says that historical revelation, in liberal thought, often is taken as the record of man's search for God and his increasingly adequate definitions. The true meaning of revelation, though, is the self-disclosure of God. In the Christian scheme of things, this revelation is seen only with the eye of faith. It is a self-validating process. If man looks for the explanation of human affairs as the judgments of God in history, he finds in this explanation a key that works and a formula that is adequate as is no other hypothesis. The testimony of man's sense of moral obligation as being neither self-imposed nor socially imposed, but laid on by God; the sense of judgment in his failures and the felt need of reconciliation; together present to man a principle of interpretation which, applied to history, gives meaning.

Historical revelation, continues Niebuhr, is "the record of those events in history in which faith discerns the self-disclosure of God.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.    <sup>2</sup>Human Nature, chap. v, sec. 4.





What it discerns are actions of God which clarify the confrontation of man by God in the realm of the personal and individual moral life."<sup>1</sup> In history this social counterpart of the individual sense of moral obligation took the form of the covenant relation between Israel and God, with the ideal of a nation serving not its own purpose but the will of God. The prophetic analysis of the outworking of this ideal relationship, though, is that the nation, instead of serving God, mistook its own purposes for the divine ones. This has been the recurrent history of human societies.

The real evil in the human situation, according to the prophetic interpretation, lies in man's unwillingness to recognize and acknowledge the weakness, finiteness and dependence of his position . . .

. . . . .  
The catastrophes of history by which God punishes this pride, it must be observed, are the natural and inevitable consequences of men's efforts to transcend their mortal and insecure existence and to establish a security to which man has no right. One aspect of this human pride is man's refusal to acknowledge the dependent character of his life.<sup>2</sup>

Thus faith interprets history as divine judgment. That faith is the instrument of interpretation is quite valid. Every interpretation of history is in terms of some principle.

Niebuhr contends that although history does not inevitably substantiate the prophetic interpretation, history does justify the interpretation once faith in the God of the prophets is assumed. Indeed, no interpretation of history is possible without a principle of interpretation which history itself does not yield. Modern interpreters try to pretend that their theories of history are scientifically arrived at conclusions. Examples of this are the idea of progress and the Marxian historical dialectic. Any such analysis, however, is impossible without use of some presupposition of faith which becomes the principle of interpretation.

The God of Biblical faith is revealed in moral terms. When the individual's sense of being judged is projected onto the larger human scene, the catastrophic events of history are seen to have their moral implications and the God of history is revealed "as the structure, the law, the essential character of reality, as the source and centre of the created world against which the pride of man destroys itself in vain

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 136-137.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 137-139.





rebellion."<sup>1</sup> The God so revealed is neither a capricious tyrant nor simply 'natural law.' The extent of the revelation is that his wrath and mercy are manifested.

With faith as the principle of interpretation, the life and death of Christ are seen as the revelation of the character and love of God, overcoming judgment with mercy and cancelling out man's estrangement with forgiveness. All the difficult doctrines of the Atonement are efforts to relate the ultimate mystery of divine wrath and mercy to the life of man. "The good news of the gospel is that God takes the sinfulness of man into Himself; and overcomes in His own heart what cannot be overcome in human life, since human life remains within the vicious circle of sinful self-glorification on every level of moral advance."<sup>2</sup>

Christian faith regards the revelation in Christ as final because it solves man's ultimate problem regarding his own uneasy conscience, the meaning of history and the nature of God. It is an adequate answer in that, when it is put to the test of human experience, it is validated. It is adequate because, when applied to life, it breaks down the barriers between people and overcomes the individual's inner inhibitions and futilities. It is a gospel that releases life to be lived in its fullness. Niebuhr's contention is that only the gospel of the Cross will do this.

Perhaps the most vexing question is that concerning the relationship between God's mercy and His justice. Is God merciful as well as just? If He is merciful how is His mercy related to His justice?

Because Christian faith believes the final answer to this ultimate question to be given in Christ, it regards the revelation in Christ a final revelation, beyond which there can be no further essential revelation. For this reason it speaks of Christ as the express image of his person.<sup>1</sup> Here the whole depth and mystery of the divine are finally revealed.<sup>3</sup>

The difficult conception of the 'suffering servant' as the Messiah and messenger of God, suffering for the sins of the guilty though himself guiltless, and revealing thereby not simply the beauty of vicarious suffering in history, but the very character of the divine, is thus rightly regarded by the Christian faith as the ultimate revelation of God.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 141.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 142.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 132.    <sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 143-144.





It should be noted that the claim made here is not that there are no other "good" or "true" or "helpful" revelations of God or "Ultimate Reality," but only that this is the most satisfactory, the best, the one that really answers the deepest questions that man asks concerning his life and its meaning.

Niebuhr points out that this revelation is not adequate if it is conceived merely in terms of the historic Jesus who was a very, very, very good man. Man cannot transcend the relativities of history by the multiplication of superlatives. The "historic Jesus" is in the flux of history.

A doctrine is not to be discredited "because it is an assumption." All historical judgments rest on expressed or unexpressed assumptions about the character of history itself; and this in turn rests on a further assumption about the relation of history to eternity.<sup>1</sup>

Man is a creature of such stature and complexity that the reductionist's over-zealous application of the law of parsimony to theories of his nature does him less than justice. The revelation of Christ is needed not only with regard to the character of God but also as "second Adam" to show the true character of man, which, like that of God is also love. Human freedom, coerced by the unities of nature and the highly relative forms of social cohesion, only finds its adequate scope in life interpreted and lived in terms of Christ. In Niebuhr's words, "the only adequate norm is the historic incarnation of a perfect love which actually transcends history, and can appear in it only to be crucified."<sup>2</sup>

In all of this, of course, Niebuhr is making his most pertinent statements about what is necessary to proper moral development. Here he flatly affirms that the Christian gospel of the Cross is central to the understanding and solution of the problems of human nature and human history. The basic issue of Biblical religion, he affirms, is not human finiteness, but human sin.<sup>3</sup> This, in Biblical faith, is the central problem of history, and the answer is in the Incarnation and the Atonement.<sup>4</sup> It is on this note that Niebuhr concludes his statement of "The Christian View of Man."

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 145-146.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 147.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid.    <sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 147-148.



The more basic issue . . . is not the finiteness of man but his sin, not his involvement in the flux of nature but his abortive attempts to escape that flux. The issue of Biblical religion is not primarily the problem of how finite man can know God but how sinful man is to be reconciled to God and how history is to overcome the tragic consequences of its 'false eternal,' its proud and premature efforts to escape finiteness.

It is in answer to this central problem of history, as Biblical faith conceives it, that God speaks to man in the Incarnation; and the content of the revelation is an act of reconciliation in which the judgment of God upon the pride of man is not abrogated, in which the sin of man becomes more sharply revealed and defined by the knowledge that God is Himself the victim of man's sin and pride. Nevertheless the final word is not one of judgment but of mercy and forgiveness.

This doctrine of Atonement and justification is the 'stone which the builders rejected' and which must be made 'the head of the corner.' It is an absolutely essential presupposition for the understanding of human nature and human history. It is a doctrine which, as we shall see, was subordinated to the 'time-eternity' implications of the doctrine of the Incarnation in patristic Christianity. It was qualified by that same doctrine in medieval Catholicism, so that Catholicism failed to understand the full seriousness of human sin or the full tragedy of human history. It emerged with elemental force in the Protestant Reformation, to become the central truth of the Christian religion. But it quickly lost its central position, so that modern liberal Protestantism knows less of its meaning and significance than the Middle Ages did.<sup>1</sup>

#### Educational Implications

What would be the effect on education, and what form would 'moral development as an educational aim' take if Christianity, as Niebuhr presents it, were to become the dominant influence in educational thought and leadership? One might anticipate that a principle of interpretation would emerge, in terms of which contemporary conflicting philosophies and ideologies could be judged. Indeed, Christianity (Niebuhr's 'prophetic-Biblical view of life') is itself an interpretation of history and is, to use

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 147-148.







Niebuhr's own words, an expression of faith as to the nature and destiny of man. It is difficult to envisage any thoroughgoing incorporation of Christianity into an educational system without it functioning as an interpretation of history.

Should this become the case, confused and contradictory ideas from the past that still exert their influence under the guise of modern thought would be seen as mistaken attempts to interpret the whole of human experience in terms of the exaggeration and distortion of one particular aspect which, of itself, contains an element of truth. Thus, adoption of the prophetic-Biblical perspective would provide a safeguard against the tendency to seize upon any partial human experience and make it the principle of interpretation. Many modern ideas that have come, by way of the Renaissance, from the ancient world, would be recognized as echoes of the intellectual and moral confusion of a civilization that foundered in its own futility.

In the material just reviewed, Niebuhr contends that there are three modern misconceptions regarding human nature that make for just such intellectual and moral confusion in contemporary civilization. If Christianity were an effective educational influence, in its capacity as an interpretation of history it would exercise a critical and corrective influence upon these confusions. The first area of such confusion, thinks Niebuhr, is the inner conflict between idealistic and naturalistic rationalists, as well as the conflict between all rationalists and the vitalists and romanticists. In subsequent passages, Niebuhr expands upon these conflicts, involving, as they do, such divergent approaches as experimentalism and the doctrine of "blood and soil." The second modern misconception leading to moral confusion has to do with the idea of individuality. To believe that the individual can maintain integrity and autonomy in the conditions of modern life and on the terms of modern philosophies, Niebuhr regards as an ideal most difficult of realization. Under modern conditions, individuality is minimized and, eventually destroyed. Where Christianity is operative and influential, though, human dignity and individual worth are enhanced. The third modern misconception Niebuhr sees is the certainty about the goodness of man and the unwillingness of modern man to think of himself as a sinner. Here Christian influence would minimize human vanity and



pretensions and discourage arrogance and selfishness.

Because of contemporary moral confusions and their attendant futilities, modern man drifts towards that same ultimate despair which gripped the ancient world, the melancholy conclusion that life has neither meaning nor purpose. The prophetic-Biblical faith, as Niebuhr presents it, while not naively or superficially optimistic, does instil an underlying confidence in the goodness of God and his creation, and elicit a moral response based upon belief in the positive worth and meaning of life.

It is Niebuhr's contention that, when the confusions and misconceptions of modern life are judged from the prophetic-Biblical point of view, they take on their proper perspective, assume their relative importance and thus are able to contribute their partial truth to a larger, more balanced comprehension of life's meaning. It would follow, then, that the educational aim of moral development, in Niebuhr's view, will be realized satisfactorily only if man's confused and contradictory ideas of himself and his destiny are sorted out in terms of a Christian view of history.

If these things be as Niebuhr suggests, what commensurate intellectual steps, spiritual insights or moral commitments are appropriate or necessary to their educational implementation? While these steps and commitments are elaborated more fully in subsequent chapters, a preliminary statement prepares the way.

Niebuhr first postulates the "ultra-rational assumptions" of faith in God and belief that the world, God's creation, is good. A further assumption, the monist view of man, is derived from belief in God and the goodness of his creation. A third step is to look for an understanding of man from the standpoint of God. Man is not seen as unique because he is the most intelligent being or highest form of life, but because he is in the "image of God." The concept of man as "image of God" is a recognition that man's unique capacity for self-transcendence in indefinite regression is a dimension of human nature that has overtones or intimations of a yet greater transcendence. This capacity of human self-transcendence is not taken as "proof of God," but is rather a witness to him. This human capacity is not a derivative of the postulate of God, but is itself an empirical fact.







If man's attribute of self-transcending objectivity is taken as a ground of faith found in human nature, the other ground is the quality of "irrational givenness" in nature. These two aspects of nature, human and physical, lead man to look beyond the explanation of rationalistic naturalism. These phenomena of inner depth and outer randomness, though, are not proofs, but the grounds of faith, making possible the postulates about God, creation and man. These latter are not adopted following proof, but are suggested by inference and intimation. Thus, the faith necessary to and consequent upon these postulates is not an act of understanding and comprehension, but rather an experience of awareness and apprehension. Man cannot know all, but he can know enough and achieve insights adequate to his need for coping with life. The argument is that, when these assumptions, held in faith, are taken out into life, they prove themselves in the spiritual life of man. They become the verities by which he lives, and at this point take on the quality of revelation. This does not preclude critical evaluation or run contrary to intelligence, but is, nevertheless, a revealing in the evanescent of underlying relationships and verities that are seen as intimations of the nature of things.

The revelation which comes to every man in some degree, Niebuhr calls individual or general. It is the individual's consciousness of touching a reality beyond himself and beyond nature. It is a common human experience, and yet comes only to individuals in a personal and private way. Niebuhr calls it an overtone of all experience. It is illumined and made meaningful in the light of the Christian assumptions.

This brings into focus one of the most important and difficult aspects of the problem of relating Christianity meaningfully to moral development as an educational aim. Even if every other issue could be solved satisfactorily, this one remains. The Christian faith, or the Christian way of life, is not just a body of subject matter to be included in the curriculum and "taught." Its acceptance is not merely a matter of intellectual agreement that some assumptions, such as Niebuhr has outlined, are tenable, or that an intellectually satisfactory interpretation of the Bible can be managed. The actual communication of the Christian faith from person to person is dependent upon the individual experience and consequent attitude of the teacher. If he knows nothing of the experience of individual



revelation illumined by Christian interpretations, what he imparts may be nothing more than a very casual collection of historical and mythological anecdotes. Depending upon his own subjective experience, he may treat this material with bewilderment, quizzically, as a matter of historical and sociological interest, or he may be hostile for many reasons, ranging all the way from loyalty to another faith to emotionally charged rebellion because of the condition of his own life.

This aspect of the problem is so difficult as to appear almost insuperable, and tempts many people to avoid the issue altogether. The main question, however, is too important to be shelved because some aspects of the solution are so difficult. The main question is whether Niebuhr, and others like him, are right in the contention that the Christian faith has important and necessary insights into human nature and human life that have been lost to modern thought and must be recovered. If this is true of the Christian faith, then such a matter is surely of importance to public education. It is not likely to be a matter of concern, though, to persons who are strangers to what Niebuhr describes as the other aspect of revelation, the social-historical, or special, aspect.

Social-historical, or special revelation, is dependent upon an initial step of faith. This step, once taken, opens the way to an interpretation of history. As Niebuhr puts it, with faith as the principle of interpretation, the life and death of Christ are seen both as a revelation of the character and love of God and an intimation of the full stature of man. The argument is that, although history does not inevitably substantiate the prophetic interpretation, history does justify the interpretation once faith in the God of the prophets is assumed. The revelation of God which follows is not an occurrence of signs and wonders, but is in moral terms in the affairs of life. The consequent understanding of human affairs grows out of faith's interpretation of history as divine judgement.

The central feature of this revelation, of course, is the life and death of Christ, with the Atonement seen as relating the mystery of divine wrath and mercy to the life of man. The suffering of the guiltless Christ is seen as the ultimate revelation of God. This revelation in Christ is regarded as final because it deals with man's ultimate questions regarding his own uneasy conscience, the meaning of history







and the nature of God. It becomes the answer to man's questions when he asks these questions. When Christ is accepted by faith as the answer to these questions, barriers between people are broken down and inhibitions are overcome. Here the answer is found as to whether Christianity does have an essential, indispensable contribution to make to human moral development. The Christian answer, as explicated by Niebuhr, is that there is a hard and untouched core of human selfishness and guilty pride, otherwise unreached, but melted and transformed by the love of God revealed in Christ.

Thus the Christian faith sees Christ as the only adequate norm, transcending history and appearing only to be crucified. It is maintained that the Christian gospel of the Cross is central to the understanding and solution of problems of human nature and conduct. The basic human problem is seen not as finiteness but sin. The answer is sought in the Incarnation and the Atonement. When one is considering by what means and to what degree Christian faith and secular education can be integrated, it may be observed that, while a greatly diluted and "objective" history of Christianity may be incorporated into the curriculum fairly easily, this does not solve the problem of how to relate secular education to the gospel of Christ as the Saviour of the world and final revelation of God.

It may be pointed out that Niebuhr's interpretation of Christian faith, translated into life, is not subject to the criticism sometimes made that Christianity is other-worldly and irrelevant. The outcome of this faith is not social inertia but vital concern with the problems of this world. History is the arena of God's judgements and is to be taken most seriously. Furthermore, Christianity, so interpreted, does not submerge individuality, as do both mysticism and modern technological society, but enhances the individual and contends for his worth. Life is seen to be not evil, but good. Man is regarded realistically as an anxious, self-regarding sinner, but hopefully also, as a child of God whose destiny is to grow towards that potential revealed in Christ. It is a positive, realistic, optimistic interpretation of human life and history. It offers no panaceas nor easy solutions. It does point the way to moral development.



## CHAPTER III

### WHAT IS MAN ?

#### Niebuhr's Statement of the Christian View of Man

According to Niebuhr, the Christian view of man is an attempt to account for three aspects of human existence. It is sharply distinctive from other views in the manner of its interpretation. In Niebuhr's words:

(1) It emphasizes the height of self-transcendence in man's spiritual stature in its doctrine of 'image of God.' (2) It insists on man's weakness, dependence, and finiteness, on his involvement in the necessities and contingencies of the natural world, without, however, regarding this finiteness as, of itself, a source of evil in man. In its purest form the Christian view of man regards man as a unity of God-likeness and creatureliness in which he remains a creature even in the highest spiritual dimensions of his existence and may reveal elements of the image of God even in the lowliest aspects of his natural life. (3) It affirms that the evil in man is a consequence of his inevitable though not necessary unwillingness to acknowledge his dependence, to accept his finiteness and to admit his insecurity, an unwillingness which involves him in the vicious circle of accentuating the insecurity from which he seeks to escape.<sup>1</sup>

#### Man as the Image of God<sup>2</sup>

The Christian view of man as spirit is an idea that has clarified as it has developed. It is better understood by comparison with earlier Hebrew and Greek terms to which it is related. Ruach and nephesh both meant "breath" and "wind," are used interchangeably, and both connote the Hebraic sense of the unity of body and soul. Gradually a distinction was made in Hebrew thought. Nephesh was located in the blood and came to mean "soul," psyche, or life principle within man. Ruach referred to man's relation to God. The prophets were thought of as being animated by the ruach of God.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 150.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 151 ff.





The Greek words psyche and pneuma express practically the same meanings and make the same distinction in the New Testament as did nephesh and ruach in later Old Testament writing. Thus pneuma and ruach signify "spirit" or relationship with God, while nephesh and psyche retain the meaning of "soul" or life-principle of the body.

Body, soul and spirit are not conceived as separate entities but as different aspects of the individual. The Hebraic sense of the unity of body and soul is maintained, in contrast to the Greek idea of the separation and antagonism of flesh and spirit. The New Testament pneuma, also, is not to be confused with the more rationalistic nous of Greek philosophy. Sarx in the New Testament (Paul), is used to designate not literally "flesh" so much as the principle of sin within the body.

Thus, in the New Testament, pneuma or "spirit" emerges as the word describing 'man's capacity for and affinity with the divine, "distinguished but not separated from "soul" and thought of, with the body as aspects of the one person. (Niebuhr points out that some commentators think the Pauline pneuma to be no natural capacity but a special gift of God. He rejects this as a "plausible, though not conclusive, opinion."<sup>1</sup>) This New Testament psychology, seen against the background of the Genesis doctrine of man made in the image of God, emerges as the Christian operational term to describe those aspects of man's experience which are not adequately comprehended in the concepts of man as physical organism informed by life-principle or soul. The vertical dimension of man, with his capacity for self-transcendence is inadequately and inaccurately described by the diminishing term "psycho-physical organism" of modern psychology. The Christian view of man as "spirit" and "image of God" recognizes a complexity and stature in humanity which, Niebuhr contends, must be taken into account in any realistic and adequate approach to human problems.

In its historical interpretation, the doctrine of man as image of God, at some stages has been influenced by Platonic and Aristotelian emphasis upon man as rational being, "Yet even in the most Platonic and Aristotelian forms of Christianity some suggestions of the "imago Dei"

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 152.



as an orientation of man toward God, some hint of the Christian understanding of man's capacity for indeterminate self-transcendence is given."<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr regards Augustine as "the first Christian theologian to comprehend the full implications of the Christian doctrine of man."<sup>2</sup> In Augustine's view, man's "power of transcendence places him so much outside of everything else that he can find a home only in God."<sup>3</sup> Augustine, in Niebuhr's estimate,

was able to exploit what mysticism and Christianity, at their best, have in common: their understanding that the human spirit in its depth and height reaches into eternity and that this vertical dimension is more important for the understanding of man than merely his rational capacity for forming general concepts. This latter capacity is derived from the former. It is, as it were, a capacity for horizontal perspectives over the wide world, made possible by the height at which the human spirit is able to survey the scene.

However, Augustine's Biblical faith always prompts him to stop short of the mystic deification of self-consciousness. Man's powers point to God, but they cannot comprehend him. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Thus Augustine emphasizes fully man's spiritual nature without falling into the error of mysticism. He sees human life as pointing beyond itself, but realizes that human life must not try to identify itself with or make itself into that Beyond. To do this is sin. He keeps clear the distinction between the human and the divine.

From Augustine, through Calvin and Luther on into modern times, Christian thought, when it has been free of Platonic and Aristotelian influence, has interpreted human nature as including man's rational faculties but going beyond them. Niebuhr credits Heidegger with "the ablest non-theological analysis of human nature in modern times," set forth in terms of "the idea of 'transcendence.'"<sup>5</sup> In similar vein he quotes Max Scheler and Kierkegaard to underline the concept of man's transcendence not only of natural process but also of himself.

In terms of this line of thought man's total stature of freedom requires nothing less than a trans-historical norm as its ultimate reference, a source and key to the structure of meaning which transcends

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 153.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 153-154.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 157.    <sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 161-162.







the world beyond his own capacity to transcend it. Here again, the question becomes one of adequacy: the adequacy of God revealed in Christ as a norm compared to the inadequacy of the alternative norms with which man inevitably tries to fill the "void at the top."

In fact, the problem is just "the void at the top." What is to be the ultimate principle of interpretation? Man, with his freedom and ability to transcend himself, cannot interpret his situation without finding a key which is more transcendent than himself. Just as man's free spirit transcends his rational faculties, so the problem of meaning transcends the ordinary rational problem of tracing causal relations.

This problem is not solved without the introduction of a principle of meaning which transcends the world of meaning to be interpreted. If some vitality of existence, or even some subordinate principle of coherence is used as the principle of meaning, man is involved in idolatry. He lifts some finite and contingent element of existence into the eminence of the divine. He uses something which itself requires explanation as the ultimate principle of coherence and meaning.<sup>1</sup>

More obvious forms of idolatry are the deification of tribe and nation. More covert and specious is the attempt to make some subordinate principle of interpretation into an ultimate one. When this is done with the causal sequence, mechanistic interpretations prevail. When the principle of rationality is thus deified, the contradictions of life reveal its invalidity. Transcendent mind cannot explain itself by itself.

The adequate trans-historical norm, says Niebuhr, is in the revelation of Christ.

In Christian faith the place of Christ as both the revelation of the character of God and of the essential nature of man (the 'second Adam') does justice to the fact that man can find his true norm only in the character of God but is nevertheless a creature who cannot and must not aspire to be God. The God who is his norm is God as He is revealed in a character of human history, that is, in Christ. Christ is at once an historical character and more than an historical character. His life transcends the possibilities of history but it remains relevant to all historical striving, for all historical goals can be expressed only in supra-historical terms. If stated in purely historical terms,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 164-165.



they will embody some contingency of nature and history and set a false limit for the human spirit. This aspect of Christian Christology is not understood by naturalistic versions of the Christian faith in which the 'Jesus of history' becomes the norm of life. These versions do not understand the total stature of freedom in which human life stands and are therefore not able to appreciate the necessity of a trans-historical norm of historical life.

The perfect love of the life of Christ ends on the Cross, after having existed in history. It is therefore supra-historical, not in the sense of setting up a non-historical eternity as the goal of human life; but in the sense that the love which it embodies is the point where history culminates and ends.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's position is that the situation calls for a faith that surpasses, but does not contradict reason. Although faith cannot contradict reason, neither can it be subordinated to reason. To subordinate faith to reason implies the answer. It is because man is "in the image of God" that he cannot be satisfied with a god in his own image. The doctrines of "man as image of God" and "man as creature" correct and supplement one another.

#### Man as Creature

In the Biblical view, as held by Niebuhr, the finite, contingent world is not evil because of its finiteness. The body is not a source of sin and particularity is not an evil. Death is not an evil. Man's finiteness is a part of God's plan, to be accepted with humility. Each fragment seeks to comprehend and realize the whole. God is always beyond human efforts to comprehend him. It is not finiteness, however, but anxiety about it that causes sin. The created is someone other than God. All creatures exist in God's providence. The brevity and impotence of man stands in contrast to the majesty and eternity of God.

In Niebuhr's interpretation of the Christian view, the doctrine of the goodness of creation is basic. This is a rejection of the neo-Platonic idea of creation as a corruption of original divine unity and eternity, as well as of the Buddhist view of creation as evil because of desire, pain and the insufficiency of life.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 163-164.





The whole import of the Christian doctrine of creation for the Christian view of man is really comprehended in the Christian concept of individuality. The individual is conceived of as a creature of infinite possibilities which cannot be fulfilled within terms of this temporal existence. But his salvation never means the complete destruction of his creatureliness and absorption into the divine. On the other hand, though finite individuality is never regarded as of itself evil, its finiteness, including the finiteness of the mind, is never obscured. The self, even in the highest reaches of its self-consciousness, is still the finite self, which must regard the pretensions of universality, to which idealistic philosophies for instance tempt it, as a sin. It is always a self, anxious for its life and its universal perspectives qualified by its 'here and now' relation to a particular body. Though it surveys the whole world and is tempted to regard its partial transcendence over its body as proof of its candidature for divinity, it remains in fact a very dependent self.<sup>1</sup>

So insidious is human pride that even those who are quite aware of their finiteness and their proclivity to anxious self-assertion will, nonetheless, have the same pretensions. It is at this point, says Niebuhr, that it can be seen most clearly that Christianity is not "idealism." Even if Platonic concepts had not exerted such influence upon Christian thinkers, human pride would still reject a faith that discounted it.

Yet is it important to recognize that Christianity in its authentic and Biblical form is not subject to the charge of 'idealism' so frequently levelled at it by materialists and naturalists. It knows of the finiteness of the self, and of its involvements in all the relativities and contingencies of nature and history. The presuppositions of its faith make it possible to realize that the self in the highest reaches of its self-consciousness is still the mortal and finite self.<sup>2</sup>

While delineating that which he believes to be the central Christian position, Niebuhr admits that historic Christian thought has not always preserved these Biblical insights, but from the very beginning "incorporated some of the errors of idealism and mysticism, including their mistaken estimates of the human situation, into its own thought; and has never completely expelled them."<sup>3</sup> Greek Christianity, from Origen on, incorporated neo-Platonism into its theology, with special emphasis upon the sinfulness of sex. This emphasis remains today.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 169-170.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 170.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 171.



Similarly, sin and evil were identified with the mutability of the temporal world, and a dualistic Christianity was nurtured which began in pre-Augustinian times and persists until today. "On its Hellenistic side, Christianity exhibits many similarities with the Greek cults of immortality and the mystery religions. Salvation is frequently defined as the ultimate deification of man, through Christ's conquest of human mortality."<sup>1</sup>

In a rather detailed discussion of the various views of the relation of sin to death, Niebuhr concedes that "the dominant note in the Biblical view of death is that it illustrates the difference between the majesty of God and the weakness and dependence of man as creature."<sup>2</sup> Thus Niebuhr maintains that, among the various streams of thought and interpretation, the dominant Biblical view persists of man as finite and, though involved in sin, living a life in a creation that is, nevertheless good.

#### Relevance: Past and Present

Those who make their judgments in these matters on the basis of historical scholarship and literary criticism recognize that Christian thinking developed in a dual cultural milieu. Its original, native relationship is that of organic unity and consistency with Judaistic views of God, man and the world. Almost from its inception, however, Christianity had to address itself to and come to terms with the dominant Hellenistic culture. Consequently, much Christian thinking and writing in the first centuries of the Christian era was directed to this end. Christian teachers and evangelists worked in a context of Hellenistic presuppositions, and often had these same assumptions as native to their own thought. Looking back upon this situation, it is easy to confuse the issues. What an early Christian apologist regarded as an effort to translate Christian teaching into terms intelligible to Hellenists may be taken today as evidence that "Christianity was Hellenistic."

This, of course, has been the problem of the Church in every age: to relate its Gospel to the thinking of that age in such a way as to demonstrate the relevance of durable principles to contemporary situations.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 173.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 175-176.







This has been the experience and the difficulty of some modern "liberal" thinkers who go so far in endeavoring to accommodate and relate the Gospel to humanism that it becomes difficult to determine just which they really are themselves.

### The Christian View of Man as Sinner<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to the trends of humanism and liberalism, Niebuhr insists that the problem of sin is a real one and that it cannot be evaded or played down in any serious study of human nature. He views anxiety, temptation and sin as interrelated and bound up with the problems of finiteness and freedom. "The distinctively Christian doctrine is that sin has its source not in temporality but in man's willful refusal to acknowledge the finite and determinate character of his existence . . ."<sup>2</sup>

The problem of finiteness and freedom underlies all religion. The unique Biblical approach is subordination of the problem of finiteness to the problem of sin. Man's temptation arises as he would break these limits of finiteness or escape his freedom. The temptation arises out of man's false interpretation of his own situation. This interpretation is not purely of his own imagination. "It is suggested to man by a force of evil which precedes his own sin. Perhaps the best description or definition of this mystery is the statement that sin posits itself, that there is no situation in which it is possible to say that sin is either an inevitable consequence of the situation nor yet that it is an act of sheer and perverse individual defiance of God."<sup>3</sup>

The occasion of temptation is the paradox of man's greatness and weakness, limited and unlimited knowledge, blindness and far-sightedness as he stands at the juncture of nature and spirit, involved in both freedom and necessity. "His sin is never the mere ignorance of his ignorance. It is always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and to obscure his insecurity by stretching his power beyond its limits."<sup>4</sup>

Man is doubly tempted to seek security at the expense of other life and to deny the limitations of his knowledge through his pretensions.

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<sup>1</sup>Niebuhr's treatment of this subject is found in chaps. vii, viii and ix of Human Nature.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 177.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 181.    <sup>4</sup>Ibid.



His situation is one of anxiety. This is an inevitable concomitant of his freedom and finiteness, and is the internal precondition of sin, the internal aspect of temptation. Anxiety, though, must not be equated with sin because of the ideal possibility that faith in the ultimate security of God's love will overcome the immediate insecurities of nature and history, thus purging anxious man of the tendency to sinful self-assertion. Anxiety, furthermore, is the basis of human creativity and spur to greater achievement. It is difficult to separate clearly the creative and destructive elements of anxiety. Kierkegaard, Luther and Heidegger all have observed this human condition, in which the source of creativity and the temptation to sin are inextricably interwoven, and anxious man is lifted by his aspirations and driven by his fears. Anxiety issues in sins of pride or sensuality as man seeks to establish his security or escape his freedom and responsibility by losing himself in some natural vitality.

#### The Sin of Pride

While sin may take other forms, a recurring element, never far removed from man's anxiety, is his pride. Indeed, the definition of sin is hardly complete without this ingredient. Niebuhr states that "Biblical and Christian thought has maintained with a fair degree of consistency, that pride is more basic than sensuality."<sup>1</sup>

Where the classical view of man predominates, sin is equated with sensuality. Augustinian theology consistently defines sin as pride. This Biblical view is substantiated by the observable behavior of men, who demonstrate three types of pride in actual life: pride of power, pride of knowledge and pride of virtue. The last named rises into a fourth type of all-inclusive self-glorification: spiritual pride.

Niebuhr has related the sin of pride causally to anxiety. The sequence appears as follows:

1. The ultimate consequence in human behavior is selfishness, rivalry and strife.
2. This results from the various types of expression which man gives to his pride: power, intellectual, moral, spiritual and collective.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 186. See Romans 1:23.





3. The pride thus expressed, however, is not a primary cause, but is itself symptomatic of underlying anxiety.
4. Anxiety is not situational. It is more than a passing mood related to temporary crises in man's life, and thus amenable to abatement by solution of specific problems.
5. The basic problem, and cause to be treated is human nature itself. Man's nature is not evil but is, to paraphrase Niebuhr, a paradox of greatness and weakness, limited and unlimited knowledge, blindness and far-sightedness, as he stands at the juncture of nature and spirit, involved in both freedom and necessity.<sup>1</sup>
6. In this situation, man becomes anxious and endeavors to overcome or obscure his condition of contingency and creatureliness. The paradox is accentuated by the fact that the same anxiety which impels man to prideful self-assertion is also the dynamic of his creativity.
7. The problem thus appears to lie in man's inability or unwillingness to see himself as living within the providence of God and, in the words of Jesus "being not anxious." This involves the related question of how to eliminate the destructive features of man's anxious self-assertion and yet retain the dynamic of his creativity.

### Pride of Power

Pride of power may be based upon a presumed security, with failure to recognize the contingent and dependent nature of life; or it may result from a position of insecurity, with a consequent lust for power. Man may turn to the conquest of nature and to outright greed as a means of self-aggrandizement. At other times power over man will be the road in the search for personal security.

Adler's "sense of inferiority" and Horney's "general insecurities of competitive civilization" stop short of the real cause of man's anxious drive to power: the basic insecurity of human existence and his insignificance in the total scheme of life. Even the well-established Pharaohs

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 181.



sought through mighty pyramids to affirm their own continuing significance and security. Bertrand Russell observed that man's chief desires are for power and glory and that every man would like to be God, but some few found it difficult to admit the impossibility.

No matter what his degree of attainment, anxious man strives for more, revealing his basic insecurity. "Thus man seeks to make himself God because he is betrayed by both his greatness and his weakness; and there is no level of greatness and power in which the lash of fear is not at least one strand in the whip of ambition."<sup>1</sup>

### Comment

If Niebuhr's appraisal of the situation is right, here is material indeed for the study of moral development as an educational aim. If this estimate of human nature is accurate, it colors all else.

1. The basis for the drive for power is said to be a universal one. This means that in every person this will manifest itself in some form: in overt, ambitious activity if there seems hope of success; in attitudes of despair, resignation, inferiority or resentment, depending on the degree of frustration. All will be related either positively or negatively to this power drive. Those who have attained a philosophy or outlook of life which enables them to rise above the power motive will, by their active adherence to and practicing of this philosophy, be witnessing to the presence and threat of that which they have transcended. Here is a fruitful field for psychological research.
2. No matter what his degree of attainment, anxious man strives for more. Such restlessness and discontent, keeping mankind in constant turmoil, and underlying the ever-shifting class and power structures of society, may be a more potent, persistent and pervasive source of human misery than the actual social structures which are so often attacked as the cause of evil.
3. The problem is complicated by the fact that the power drive

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 194.





is seemingly so inextricably linked with creativity.

Exponents of the system of private enterprise never tire of reminding the world that the profit motive, the hope and stimulus of personal advancement, is the motive informing human industry and creativity, and that the beneficial results of the creativity are by-products.

4. A common viewpoint appears to be that human intelligence, if given full scope, will "see through" these situations and lead man automatically or inevitably onto the higher ground of creativity, and show him that his own best self-interest corresponds with that of his fellow men. This Niebuhr would regard as a one-sided intellectualistic approach, a glossing over and oversimplification.

#### Intellectual Pride

Pride of power, spiritually sublimated, may reappear as intellectual pride. This is "the pride of reason which forgets that it is involved in a temporal process and imagines itself in complete transcendence over history."<sup>1</sup> This is more than man's ignorance of his own ignorance. It includes as well the hidden or recognized motive of obscuring self-interest.

A philosopher who can detect past errors because of his present point of vantage tends to forget that his own high pinnacle shortly will take its place in the perspective and relativity of history.

Each great thinker makes the same mistake, in turn, of imagining himself to be the final thinker. Descartes, Hegel, Kant and Comte, to mention only a few moderns, were so certain of the finality of their thought that they have become fair sport for any wayfaring cynic. Not the least pathetic is the certainty of a naturalistic age that its philosophy is a final philosophy because it rests on science, a certainty which betrays ignorance of its own prejudices and failure to recognize the limits of scientific knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr is particularly sensitive to the social and political dangers inherent in intellectual pride, particularly in the predictably regular employment by ruling oligarchies of ideological pretensions as the bulwark of authority. This is the "ideological taint,"<sup>3</sup> and is a subtle,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 1.195.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.194.



pervasive recurrent social problem. It is all the more insidious because of the inability of those involved to recognize it in themselves. "The Marxist detection of the ideological taint in the thought of all bourgeois culture is significantly unembarrassed by any scruples about the conditioned character of its own viewpoints."<sup>1</sup> The very vehemence with which the "ideologist" attacks others betrays his unspoken and perhaps unrecognized desperation at the finiteness and contingency of his own position.

Intellectual pride is indicative of the anxieties man knows because of his freedom and insecurity. If he were not a free spirit, transcending all situations, unconditioned truth and the desire to establish it would not concern him. If he were completely immersed in nature, he would possess his own "sufficient" truth and have no interest in establishing his truth as the truth.<sup>2</sup>

### Comment

The very reason or intelligence whose fuller use is commonly advocated as a guide in moral development, Niebuhr regards as a principal vehicle of pride. The "ideological taint," or inevitable infiltration of self-interest, disqualifies intelligence as a moral guide. Men see this in others but are blind to it in themselves. Niebuhr refers to "the certainty of a naturalistic age that its philosophy is a final philosophy because it rests upon science."<sup>3</sup> So subject to the subversions of self-interest and pride is human intelligence that its value and functioning as a moral guide must always be kept under review. Objectivity is maintained only with the greatest difficulty, and often not at all.

### Moral Pride

This is a yet further refinement of the sin of pride. It goes beyond the assertion of "my truth" as "the truth" to the dogmatic proclamation of "my good" as "the good." The highly conditioned virtue of finite man is set forth as the ultimate righteousness. It leads on to the condemnation of points of view at variance with the "self-righteous" standard, and eventuates in discrimination and persecution. Thus cruelty is related to self-righteousness. "When the self mistakes its standards

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 196.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 197.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 195.







for God's standards it is naturally inclined to attribute the very essence of evil to non-conformists."<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr points to this as "the primary issue of the Protestant Reformation."<sup>2</sup> In the Reformation, Luther, on the basis of Paul's teaching, denies the possibility of "salvation by works." This is essentially a denial of the possibility of any man or human institution achieving a position of "ultimate righteousness," of "my good" being "the good. The medieval church dubbed as "the enemies of God" those who were really in rebellion against inevitably corrupt institutions making false claims of perfection and authority. "Luther rightly insisted that the unwillingness of the sinner to be regarded as a sinner was the final form of sin. The final proof that man no longer knows God is that he does not know his own sin."<sup>3</sup>

### Spiritual Pride

"The sin of moral pride," says Niebuhr, "when it has conceived, brings forth spiritual pride. The ultimate sin is the religious sin of making the self-deification implied in moral pride explicit."<sup>4</sup> Spiritual pride is the identification of our partial standards and attainments with the unconditioned good, with claims of an ultimate, or divine sanction. Its vehicle is the religious institution, the religious life and the religious attitude. Men who make no profession whatsoever of the religious life and who are explicitly hostile to religious institutions may, nevertheless, indulge themselves fully in this sin under the guise of channelling their religious zeal into so-called secular courses. It is at this point that the secularist characteristically entrenches himself in his misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Biblical religion and compounds his sin with delusions or pretensions of immunity.

Niebuhr points out that religion is not necessarily "an inherently virtuous human quest for God"<sup>5</sup> but is rather the final battleground in the conflict between God and human self-esteem. Pious practices are readily subverted to the service of human pride. A man may be humble before God one moment, and arrogant towards an opponent in the next, conceiving his opponent to be also God's opponent. Intolerance and self assertion assume their worst forms in religious guise. Thus

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.199. <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.200. <sup>3</sup>Ibid. <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.200. <sup>5</sup>Ibid.



have Roman Catholics venerated the Church, Protestants a particular interpretation of Scripture and secularists their own subjective values or social goals.

We have previously dwelt upon the fallacious hope of modern culture that the elimination of religion might result in the elimination of religious intolerance. Religion, by whatever name, is the inevitable fruit of the spiritual stature of man; and religious intolerance and pride is the final expression of his sinfulness. A religion of revelation is grounded in the faith that God speaks to man from beyond the highest pinnacle of the human spirit; and that this voice of God will discover man's highest not only to be short of the highest but involved in the dishonesty of claiming that it is the highest.<sup>1</sup>

### Dishonesty and Pride<sup>2</sup>

Dishonesty is a concomitant of self-love. The self must deceive itself and others as to its own goodness. The fact that man has to deceive himself is an indication of a residual goodness in man and a refutation of theories of total depravity. This is an important point in Niebuhr's line of argument. Man's dishonesty need not be conscious. It will, however, be recognized in moments of insight, with consequent remorse. Both Marxism and modern psychology recognize this element of dishonesty. Psychology, however, sees it only as an attempt to satisfy social norms.

Niebuhr sees man as deceiving himself and then penetrating his own self-deception. The essential self recognizes the deceptions of the contingent self. This is not to say that there are two selves. It is the same self, first active in a contingent situation and afterwards looking back on its actions in contemplation and evaluation. The sinful self needs these deceptions. Otherwise it could not pursue its own ends. It must at least pay tribute to truth and selflessness. It tries to hide its self interest behind a facade of general interest. This attempt is not successful.

Man's pretensions are a vain attempt to deceive others so that their good opinion of him will reassure his contingent self against his essential self. Thus man compounds his own insecurity.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.203.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.203 ff.







### Collective Pride

Niebuhr regards collective pride as another dimension of the moral problem. When the group develops organs of will, as in the apparatus of the state, it seems to become an independent centre of moral life, so impressive and overpowering that man is inclined to bow to it even when it is against his moral scruples. ". . . The pretensions and claims of a collective or social self exceed those of the individual ego. The group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centered and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual. An inevitable moral tension between individual and group morality is therefore created."<sup>1</sup>

The power and panoply of the state evokes fear and reverence, a religious reverence that has in it an implicit idolatry. This has been seen at its worst in the immoderate claims of modern fascist states. The organs of transcendence in the nation are weak in comparison with the state's organs of will. It is a case of the independent prophetic minority standing against the government and its police power. This is a spiritual phenomenon, not an aspect of nature. The lust for power and prestige, treating others with contempt and hypocrisy, the claims to moral autonomy: all these are of the spirit.

Nations, like individuals, in asserting themselves claim, on the one hand that it is for survival and on the other that it is a selfless effort to maintain transcendent and universal values. Then the state goes on to make unconditioned claims for itself. Through this collective claim, human pride and self-assertion reach their ultimate form. The nation claims to be God and makes unconditioned demands upon the individual. The individual, on the other hand, identifies himself with the nation, participating in its collective egotism and patriotism and experiencing new vistas of self-aggrandizement. Historically, the lower middle class have identified themselves with fascism while the industrial lower classes find their reflected glory in Marxism, both groups thus compensating for feelings of inferiority. This, says Niebuhr, is man's last and most pathetic effort to deny his determinate and contingent existence, and is a greater source of injustice than individual pride.

It was in opposition to collective pride that prophetic religion came

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 11.208-209.



into being. After the manner of historical institutions, though, the church itself became an instrument of spiritual pride. To its credit, it did check the autonomy of nations, but only at the price of itself developing another human majesty under the guise of religion. In this development it may be seen how insidious is pride in corrupting the very instrument intended to mitigate it. So overbearing became the church that by contrast it made the rise of the new nations look like emancipation from religious tyranny.

Actually the new nationalism ushered in a yet more anarchic period of individual self-assertion by men and nations in the name of liberty. Machiavelli taught the moral autonomy of the state and Bruno the moral autonomy of the individual, while Luther was more intent upon challenging the pride of the Pope than the arrogance of kings. This opened the door to political arrogance in the rising nations.

Thus the Renaissance and Reformation ushered in the contemporary period of decadence in which the collective will of man, in national guise, ran amok. This modern anarchy has been partly a reaction to the Christian error of deifying the church. Partly, however, it has been a reaction to the truth of Christianity, the conscious defiance of a known law, in the breaking of which nationalism assumes all the stances of desperation and arrogance so familiar in the modern world. The final sin is unwillingness to hear the word of judgment. Fascism has been expressed within and against the Christian culture.

### Sin as Sensuality<sup>1</sup>

It is in terms of pride of power, knowledge, virtue and spirit, with special emphasis upon group pretensions that Niebuhr describes the sinfulness of man. The customary emphasis upon sin as sensuality he reverses. That which has been the subject of dogmatic and morbid preoccupation on the one hand and gross caricature on the other, Niebuhr relegates to a secondary and derivative position, seeing sensuality as a by-product of anxious pride and a way of expressing that pride and anxiety, rather than the major and almost exclusive sin it is sometimes made out to be. He contends that sin as lust and sensuality is a Hellenistic conception as opposed to the Biblical view of sin primarily as pride.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 228-240.







In the Biblical perspective, sensuality is seen as a type of selfishness, consisting of undue devotion to particular impulses. Often the proud judge is more guilty than the profligate whom he judges.

Criticism of Christianity as prurient is misplaced. It is not Christianity but Hellenism and rationalism that equate sin with sensuality and sex. True, the Greek Fathers, such as Origen, Clement and Gregory of Nyssa introduced this Platonic idea. This is not the Pauline-Augustinian tradition, however. The First Chapter of The Epistle to the Romans sets forth the idea that the basic sin is pride and self-deification, of which unnatural lust is a consequence and for which unnatural lust is a punishment.

Augustine followed Paul in this, while Thomistic and Lutheran theology is in the same tradition. The Hellenistic ideas are to be discounted as not in harmony with the Biblically-based concept of sin as pride. Sensuality is to be understood as a further confusion consequent upon the original confusion of substituting the self for God. Man, having lost the true center of his life, is no longer able to maintain his own will as the center of himself. In this concept of sin is a certain ambivalence, as sensuality now appears as self-love and then has the aspect of an attempt to escape from self.

Thus both drunkenness and sexuality become escapes from life's tensions. Christianity has insights into sex which modern thought completely misses. Sex is not sin but may become a particularly effective medium of self-assertion, self-escape and compensation. The most corrupt form of sensuality is commercialized vice. Sexuality in man is never merely physical, but is compounded with the anxieties and complexities of his spirituality.

Man, having lost the true centre of his life in God, falls into sensuality; and sex is the most obvious occasion for the expression of sensuality and the most vivid expression of it. Thus sex reveals sensuality to be first another and final form of self-love, secondly an effort to escape self-love by the deification of another and finally as an escape from the futilities of both forms of idolatry by a plunge into unconsciousness.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.239.



### Sin and Guilt<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr suggests that the problem of sin raises the question: If all are sinners, what about individual differences? Guilt is the objective consequence of sin. All men are sinners, but all are not equally guilty. In many situations guilt is more equally shared than at first seems apparent. Yet, men who are equally sinners may not be equally guilty. Niebuhr suggests that groups such as the Lutherans have blindness to these specific differences, and have difficulty dealing with specific moral issues.

In prophetic religion, specially severe judgments fall upon the rich and powerful. Privileged people, tempted, become more guilty than those who lack power and position. Pride leads to injustice. The prophetic note of moral discrimination is maintained in the New Testament, and includes the good in the judgment of God. Every civilization idealizes and rationalizes its power with morals which serve the ruling oligarchy. This is the "ideological taint." Capitalists are not greater sinners, but people of great economic power are more guilty of pride against God and injustice against the weak than are the poor. The powerful man's ego expands upward in pride, and horizontally to gain security. But, the poor of yesterday become the arrogant rich of today. Victims imagine that injustice is the particular vice of their oppressor. Men of intellectual, spiritual and moral eminence have the same perils. The intellectual man is not necessarily the good man. He may be the servant of passion. When one realizes sin is in all men, then one can penetrate the illusions and pretensions of all men. All are guilty and need help. "It is only by an ultimate analysis from beyond all human standards that the particular guilt of the great and good men of history is revealed."<sup>2</sup>

### Sin and Man's Responsibility

Niebuhr sees the doctrine of sin's inevitability and man's responsibility as logically absurd. The underlying doctrine of free will he also regards as seemingly absurd. According to that doctrine, original sin, whether it be described as "inherited" or "inevitable" is not considered as belonging to man's essential nature. If it were, there could be no free will. If it is not man's essential nature, though, then he is

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp.219-227.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.227.





responsible. "Sin is natural for man in the sense that it is universal but not in the sense that it is necessary."<sup>1</sup> Accepting both the necessity and the absurdity of the doctrine, Niebuhr quotes Pascal's similar acceptance:

For it is beyond doubt that there is nothing which more shocks our reason than to say that the sin of the first man has rendered guilty those who, being so removed from its source, seem incapable of participating in it. . . . Certainly nothing offends us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet without this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we are incomprehensible to ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr's argument here is a reiteration of his familiar principle of adequacy. Granted that the doctrine is logically absurd, he contends that no less doctrine than this gives an adequate explanation of man. Thus he sums up the necessity of a doctrine that conforms to actual experience.

Historically, the opposition to the doctrine of original sin has been called Pelagianism. Its position is that man's actions cannot be regarded as sinful or involving guilt if they do not proceed from a will which is essentially free. Any bias toward sin would be attributed to nature, and actual sin is the result of conscious preference. Any inherited sloth is in history and therefore outside man's nature. It is a matter of social inheritance, a theory virtually the same as that of "cultural lag." This, says Niebuhr, is the view of the Christian liberals, such as Walter Rauschenbusch.<sup>3</sup> This relieves man of responsibility for all wrong actions excepting such as are clearly deliberate. "Pelagianism, in short, ascribes all sins to 'deliberate malice and pravity' to use Calvin's phrase."<sup>4</sup>

Niebuhr's question becomes this: Is the making of every sinful act a conscious choice of evil in defiance of known good a position that "is true to the psychological and moral facts in human wrong-doing"? It is a reiteration of the demand for a theory that is adequate to the facts. Niebuhr's argument is that despite its logical absurdity, the Christian explanation, involving the seemingly contradictory doctrines

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.242.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.243 (footnote). Quoted from Pascal's Pensées, 434.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.246.    <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.247.



of original sin and free will is more consistent and more in line with the facts of human experience than are alternative explanations, particularly those of a Pelagian variety. "The truth is that, absurd as the classical Pauline doctrine of original sin may seem to be at first blush, its prestige as a part of the Christian truth is preserved, and perennially re-established, against the attacks of rationalists and simple moralists by its ability to throw light upon complex factors in human behavior which constantly escape the moralists."<sup>1</sup>

#### Niebuhr's Criterion of Adequacy Applied

The problems of human nature and behavior are difficult and complex. Niebuhr's criticism of the naturalistic rationalist solution is that it is too simple and does not really deal with the problem. Modern religious nationalism is an explicit example of organized cruelty in which people participate without deliberate or malicious choice, yet for which individuals must be held responsible for their actions. Man is responsible for his actions even though they have unconscious motivation or are carried out under the sponsorship, encouragement or authority of the group.

Man's sinful state, as opposed to individual and specific sins, seems to be this: because of anxiety and insecurity inherent in the very condition of his being, man is impelled to self-assertion and cruelty to reassure and "establish" himself. This never works, but turns into a vicious circle, calling for yet more selfishness and cruelty, all compounded with a yet more uneasy conscience.

The religious nationalist is a good example of sinful man. In addition to the feelings of inferiority he shares with all mankind he bears the special resentments consequent upon the fate of his nation and his class. Even though understanding may prompt forgiveness it does not eliminate responsibility. His violent self-assertion is not the only response he might make. His sin does not necessarily follow unless there exists a predisposition to sin.

The "cultural lag" theory does not explain this situation. The religious nationalist acts in conscious defiance of established universal standards, deliberately repudiating them. The more deeply

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp.248-249.





involved he becomes in "establishing" his superiority by violence and cruelty, the more his unallayed anxiety and his troubled conscience combine to drive him to yet stronger measures.

Thus in man's very nature is a bias towards sin, a predisposition which makes sin not necessary but nevertheless inevitable.

The bias toward sin is something more than a mere lag of nature or physical impulse or historical circumstance. There is, in other words, less freedom in the actual sin and more responsibility for the bias toward sin (original sin) than the moralistic interpretations can understand.

The actual sin is the consequence of the temptation of anxiety in which all life stands. But anxiety alone is neither actual nor original sin. Sin does not flow necessarily from it. Consequently the bias towards sin from which actual sin flows is anxiety plus sin. Or, in the words of Kierkegaard, sin presupposes itself. Man could not be tempted if he had not already sinned.<sup>1</sup>

#### Temptation and Inevitability

Niebuhr next points to man's propensity not only to love himself, but inevitably to pretend both to himself and others that it is really not self-interest but universal interest which he is serving. This deep involvement with deception both of self and others, Niebuhr suggests, is further evidence that sin does presuppose itself and that something more than ignorance leads the self to sin. Evil is present in man's situation of finiteness and freedom prior to any human action. The presence of this evil, predating human history and preceding human action is symbolized in Biblical thought by the conception of the devil.

One may, in other words, go farther back than human history and still not escape the paradoxical conclusion that the situation of finiteness and freedom would not lead to sin if sin were not already introduced into the situation. This is, in the words of Kierkegaard, the 'qualitative leap' of sin and reveals the paradoxical relation of inevitability and responsibility. Sin can never be traced merely to the temptation arising from a particular situation or condition in which man as man finds himself or in which particular men find themselves. Nor can the temptation which is compounded of a situation of finiteness and freedom,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 250-251.



plus the fact of sin, be regarded as leading necessarily to sin in the life of each individual, if again sin is not first presupposed in that life. For this reason even the knowledge of inevitability does not extinguish the sense of responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr says "The anxiety of freedom leads to sin only if the prior sin of unbelief is assumed."<sup>2</sup> Unbelief, in Niebuhr's interpretation, which he sets forth as the Biblical interpretation, is not a matter of incredulity or incredibility, but the process of the deification of "false eternal" and the inevitable failure to maintain proper perspective upon one's life in relation to other lives and to life itself. According to this position, moral relativism is an untenable position, resulting inevitably in moral anarchism.

### Responsibility Despite Inevitability

In place of the autonomous man, Niebuhr would propose the responsible man: the man who recognizes his own responsibility for the moral health or illness of his life and its relationships, and finds a workable solution and available salvation in faith. The faith proposed is not a fine option for the noble dilettante, but a life-adjustment, a set towards God and man that is indispensable to the total health of the individual.

Man is called upon to stop pretending that he is nobly supporting universal interests when, all along, he is seeking his own advancement. This is the "built-in" lie of human sinfulness. It is not a matter of isolated acts of conscious selfishness, but of a human nature compounded of finiteness, freedom and prior evil creating a condition from which man finds relief only through finding a new perspective on himself as a child of God.

Man's responsibility for his sinful pretensions is attested to by his feelings of remorse. The social interpretation of human action is in terms of a simple determinism, tracing wrong-doing to previous situations in a causal relationship. The interior view, however, does not accept the simple determinism of this exterior view. It recognizes its own freedom, conscious dishonesty and the testimony of remorse, repentance and uneasy conscience.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.254.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.252.





Sometimes the self is so deeply involved in sin as to seem incapable of repentance and remorse. This complacency may be on several levels, from paganism to a refined Pharisaism. But even habitual sin cannot eradicate conscience. Even in primitive faiths these are elements of freedom and uneasy conscience, while Pharasaic brutality in the face of criticism tells its own story of guilt.

Man's sin bespeaks a double insecurity. First he tries to hide his original finiteness and relativity. Then he must try to hide the dishonesty that prompted the hiding of his finiteness and insecurity. When this facade is threatened, his uneasy conscience drives him into a furious defence of his righteousness. An uneasy conscience that is not fully conscious of itself is the root of yet further sin, as it endeavors to ward off the truth by accusing others.

While all particular sins have social sources and social consequences, the real source lies in the soul's relation to God. All such experiences are religious whether they are recognized and acknowledged or not. If recognized, they lead on to repentance. The sense of guilt rises with moral sensitivity. The saint's awareness of guilt is no illusion. He knows that sin is the more terrible in its subtler forms.

The ultimate proof of the freedom of the human spirit is its own recognition that its will is not free to choose between good and evil. For in the highest reaches of the freedom of the spirit, the self discovers in contemplation and retrospect that previous actions have invariably confused the ultimate reality and value, which the self as spirit senses, with the immediate necessities of the self. If the self assumes that because it realizes this fact in past actions it will be able to avoid the corruption in future actions, it will merely fall prey to the Pharisaic fallacy.<sup>1</sup>

#### Niebuhr's View of the Self

As Niebuhr sees it, the self in contemplation as compared to the self in action is not synonymous with spirit as compared to natural vitality. This is the idealist error. There is only one self. When in action it is the empirical self. At other times it becomes the contemplative self, judging what it has done. In action it makes false claims. In contemplation it recognizes the falsity of these claims. This is not

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 258-259.



the universal self judging the finite. It is only the finite self become conscious of its finiteness. Its real standard is its own essential self, and this in turn has only God's will as norm. There is great need for the self to be constantly on guard, for it can pass quickly from contrition to self-righteousness and anxiety. No action is free of the false identification of the immediate with the ultimate. "We cannot, therefore, escape the ultimate paradox that the final exercise of freedom in the transcendent human spirit is its recognition of the false use of that freedom in action. Man is most free in the discovery that he is not free."<sup>1</sup>

### Literalistic Errors and Logical Inconsistencies

In dealing with the topic just concluded, "Original Sin," and in approaching the next section, "Original Righteousness" it is important to keep in mind two errors of the rigid mentality: literalistic interpretation and logical consistency. Unless one can rise above these simplistic criteria, the mainstream of argument very easily may be lost in the tortuous meanderings of irrelevant side issues.

Niebuhr points out that the appreciation of the doctrine of original sin has been greatly hampered by literalistic interpretations introduced by the Augustinians. "In countering the simple moralism of the Pelagians they insisted on interpreting original sin as an inherited taint."<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr contends that it is truer to the thought of Paul to stress the representative rather than the historical character of Adam's sin. "The idea of Adam as representative man allowed it to escape the historical-literalistic illusion."<sup>3</sup> The confusion introduced into the argument by literalists is really irrelevant.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.260.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.261.

<sup>4</sup>J. A. Sanders, "To Tell the Truth," The Christian Century, June 1964, pp.763-766, gives a concise account of the significance of myth in Biblical religion.

For fuller treatment of this subject see also:

Rollo May (ed.) Symbolism in Religion and Literature, New York, George Braziller, 1960.

Arnold J. Toynbee, A Study of History, Abridgement by D. C. Somervell, New York, Oxford University Press 1946, 1956. Vol. I. p. 40 and pp. 60-67.

The general interpretation is that a myth is an intuitive way of expressing a universal truth.







The fact of logical absurdity in the doctrine of original sin is best dealt with by appreciating that the paradox points to a truth which logic cannot contain. Loyalty to all the facts, as in this case, may require a provisional defiance of logic. What is of first importance is to find a formula which does justice to the complex and contradictory facts of the situation.

When this literalistic confusion is eliminated the truth of the doctrine of original sin is more clearly revealed; but it must be understood that even in this form the doctrine remains absurd from the standpoint of a pure rationalism, for it expresses a relationship between fate and freedom which cannot be fully rationalized, unless the paradox be accepted as a rational understanding of the limits of rationality and as an expression of faith that a rationally irresolvable contradiction may point to a truth which logic cannot contain.<sup>1</sup>

### Original Righteousness<sup>2</sup>

In Niebuhr's interpretation of the Gospel, man's normative characteristic is his original righteousness. This has been obscured by his sinfulness. That very sin, however, is one of the chief witnesses to his righteousness. What man is causes him such unrest and unhappiness by very reason of its contrast to what he feels (and sometimes clearly realizes) he ought to be and once was. He pines like a deposed king at the memory of his previous condition. He hears echoes of a law of righteousness that he somehow recognizes as his birthright.

No man, however deeply involved in sin, is able to regard the misery of sin as normal. Some memory of a previous condition of blessedness seems to linger in his soul; some echo of the law which he has violated seems to resound in his conscience. Every effort to give the habits of sin the appearance of normality betrays something of the frenzy of an uneasy conscience. The contrast between what man is truly and essentially and what he has become is apparent even to those who do not understand that this contrast is to be found in every human being and has its seat in the will of man himself.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Human Nature, p. 262.

<sup>2</sup> This section based on chap. x, Human Nature. <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 265.



The universal testimony of human experience points to man's original righteousness, and refutes theories of human depravity. It is true that, because of his limitations, man's very statements of perfection are tainted with sin. For a clear expression of this righteousness, Christ is required. Christ at the centre of Christianity makes for a heightened sense of sin in the Christian experience. His presence also destroys the illusory prestige of normality with which human ways of life tend to invest themselves. If the soul were not thus uneasy, Christ would find no place. Men, however, cannot forget the innocence of their childhood and the aspirations of their youth. So, in some such way as disease implies a normal state of health, man's selfish pride reminds him of a better condition. As Augustine pointed out, even the thieves are at peace amongst themselves. "Though Christian theology has frequently expressed the idea of the total depravity of man in extravagant terms, it has never been without witnesses to the fact that human sin cannot destroy the essential character of man to such a degree that it would cease being implied in, and furnishing a contrast to, what he has become."<sup>1</sup>

Here, again, the issue has always been confused by literalistic interpretations of the Genesis mythology of the Fall. This interpretation assigns perfection to an historical, or pre-historical period, and results in rationalists concentrating their attack on the credibility of the myth. This literalistic error has gained credence because of the activity of Biblical literalists, the persistence of the Stoic concept of a golden age of innocence, and the natural tendency of individuals to look back to the innocence of their own childhood as the reminder of their true nature. The chronological interpretation both misses the point and confuses the issue. The real message of the mythology of the Fall is a psychological one, a description of human personality. "When the Fall is made an event in history rather than a symbol of an aspect of every historical moment in the life of man, the relation of evil to goodness in that moment is obscured."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.267.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.269.





### Essential Nature and Original Righteousness

A distinction must be made between the essential nature of man and the virtue of conforming to that image. Niebuhr suggests that there are two elements in the essential nature of man and correspondingly two elements in the original perfection of man. The first element comprises all man's natural endowments and determinants, his physical and social impulses, his sexual and racial differentiations; in short, his character as a creature embedded in the natural order. The corresponding virtue here is the natural law, a normal harmony within himself and with his fellows in the natural order.

The second element is manifested in the freedom of his spirit, his transcendence over natural processes and, finally, his own self-transcendence. The virtues here are faith, hope and love. These virtues corresponding to the second element in man's nature, those of faith, hope and love, are not options or luxury items for man's choice and practice if he will. They are requirements of his nature. To minimize, neglect or omit them is to attempt to live life on terms less than those requisite to full humanity. "Faith in the providence of God is a necessity of freedom because, without it, the anxiety of freedom tempts man to seek a self-sufficiency and self-mastery incompatible with his dependence upon forces which he does not control. Hope is a particular form of that faith."<sup>1</sup>

The relationship of love, though, is dependent upon a prior attitude of faith. Without faith, man is anxious and becomes involved inevitably in his own egocentric concerns. Furthermore, without an ultimate relation to God, the world of human freedom becomes obscured and men sink to the level of things. Love of neighbor rests logically upon the prior necessity of trust in God and the consequent relaxation of anxiety. Thus, Niebuhr argues, these ultimate Christian requirements of faith, hope and love are not optional, but necessary and prerequisite to the full expression of man's moral life. Without these basic requirements of freedom, man's efforts at moral expression fall far short of what they might be.

Sin neither destroys the essential structure of human virtue nor

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 271.



eliminates man's sense of obligation towards this essential nature. The sense of obligation, which is the remnant of man's perfection, makes its claim upon him in his sinful state. To the sinful man, this takes the form of law, and heightens sin by rousing man's sinful egotism to a further defiance. A characteristic outcome is the Pharisaic fallacy: the assumption that to know the law is to keep it. "Man's uneasy conscience is . . . an expression of the law which is written in his own heart. . . . conscience is primarily known to man in terms of the disquiet, the sense of inner conflict, which expresses itself in all moral life."<sup>1</sup>

The complete and balanced view of man in the Christian faith is seen when, over against man's sinfulness is placed man's essential and original righteousness. In St. Paul's words (Rom. 2:14-15) the law is written in the human heart, and depends neither upon revelation nor society for its authority. It is a part of man's essential nature. To live in defiance of it is to live in chaos and misery. To the degree that man despises and does violence, wittingly or unwittingly, to the requirements of faith, hope and love, his potentialities are unrealized and his life suffers. This is so because human interdependence is part of "the real structure of life."<sup>2</sup> This need for mutuality will continue to assert itself despite the confusion which pride and egotism introduce into human relations.

#### The Locus of Original Righteousness

If original righteousness is not a condition pre-dating an historical Fall, where are we to look for the locus of this residual health? Any force or influence which tends to keep the individual in subordination to God and in co-ordination with his fellows contributes to the health of man's life. Without these conditions, man's sinful pride and self-exaltation take over and his life becomes destructive. While it is not possible to find a locus for these elements, it is possible to find a locus for the consciousness and memory of original perfection.

We have previously noted that the self which knows itself guilty is the transcendent self or, to speak more precisely, the self in the moment of transcending itself. The self in the moment of transcending itself exercises the self's capacity for infinite regression and makes the previous concretization of will its object. It is in this moment of self-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 274.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 275.







transcendence that the consciousness and memory of original perfection arise. For in this moment the self knows itself as merely a finite creature among many others and realizes that the undue claims which the anxious self in action makes, result in injustices to its fellows.<sup>1</sup>

The experience just described must not, however, be regarded as a permanent possession. This is the common mistake: to regard the self-transcendent moment as the guarantee of future virtue. Perfection before the Fall is thus perfection before the act.

Niebuhr interprets perfection before the act in the inclusive sense that thoughts are actions. The act need not be overt. Action may be of thought or mood as well as deed. Furthermore, the act, when it comes is not consciously sinful. The self which acts is unified. Otherwise there could be no action. It is only after the action that the same self, taking a position outside itself, becomes conscious of "the inordinate character of its action."<sup>2</sup>

The self throughout these phases is, then, a unified self. There are not two selves, one acting and the other judging, nor is it an encounter between a universal self and an empirical self. The tension is between the self acting according to what it conceives to be its own interests and necessities and the same self reflecting upon those actions. In its changing perspectives, the self in action appears to the transcendent self as sin, and again, the transcendent self appears to the self in action as law.

It is a human tendency to judge one's own self from the standpoint of what one knows is right, not on the basis of what one does, and to blame one's fellows. It is the sin, too, of moralistic Christianity to preach that men are as good as the ideals they entertain. This is true of the general moralism of western culture. Thus Niebuhr lifts the mythology of original righteousness and the Fall right out of the area of historical literalism, interpreting it psychologically and regarding it as "a symbol for the whole of human history."

In placing the consciousness of 'original righteousness' in a moment of the self which transcends history, though not outside of the self which is in history, it may be

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.277.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.278.



relevant to observe that this conforms perfectly to the myth of the Fall when interpreted symbolically. The myth does not record any actions of Adam which were sinless, though much is made in theology of the perfection he had before the Fall. Irenaeus, with greater realism than most theologians, observes that the period was very brief, sin following almost immediately upon his creation. Adam was sinless before he acted and sinful in his first recorded action. His sinlessness, in other words, preceded his first significant action and his sinfulness came to light in that action. This is a symbol for the whole of human history. The original righteousness of man stands, as it were, outside of history. Yet is in the man, who is in history, and when sin comes it actually borrows from this original righteousness. For the pretension of sin is that its act is not in history but an act of impartiality, a deed of eternity.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr continually stresses the ultimate unreliability of human reason. As an example of over-confidence in reason, he cites the medieval Catholic justification of the feudal-agrarian status quo, with its modern legacy of out-dated moral values still upheld in a vastly changed world. This trust in reason is the perennial failure of rationalists of all types to recognize the influence of non-rational factors and the contingent nature of all historical situations. Moral relativism based upon naturalistic empiricism (Niebuhr's term for experimentalism) is invalidated by the same error. It places a confidence in human reason which is unwarranted. "Reason is in fact in an equivocal position between the self-as-subject and the self-as-agent of action. It is the servant of both."<sup>2</sup> Thus Niebuhr rejects the idea that human reason, operating in terms of any philosophy, ever attains the objectivity and disinterestedness which it professes and pretends.

#### The Content of Original Righteousness as Law

Original righteousness, expressed in terms of "faith, hope and love," always remains with man as the ultimate requirement of his freedom. In Roman Catholic theory these "theological virtues" become completely lost through the Fall, only to be restored through the exclusive channels of grace of the Church. Niebuhr suggests that these virtues are not really "lost" even to sinful man, but remain with him

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp.279-280.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.284.







as the law of his being, always reminding him of what his potentialities really are. If the law of love is not a reality, "Thou shalt love" is a pointless commandment. If it is not a possibility, the commandment is a mockery. It is a vision of health which even the sick may envisage.

The question of the possibility of man achieving or fulfilling the law of love is bound up in consideration of the Christian doctrine of redemption. Simple moralism assumes that the law needs only to be stated to be obeyed. It does not work out this way, however, for man's anxieties about himself and his possessions enter in, and man inevitably becomes involved in the sin of establishing his own security. Jesus himself admits that the ultimate possibility of human life is beyond the capacity of sinful man, that this is something that can be achieved only from the standpoint of God's resources. While man knows the ultimate requirements upon him as a free spirit, he is not fully conscious of them nor ready to meet them. This is illustrated in the story of Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-27).

The specific content of man's "original righteousness," the ultimate requirements of his being as man, is set forth in Jesus' statement of the great commandment (Matt. 22:37-39). The three requirements listed are: the perfect relationship of the soul to God, the perfect harmony of the soul with itself and the perfect harmony of life with life. Thus the ultimate requirements and preconditions of health in man's life are that: (1) Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, (2) With all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, (3) Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Niebuhr's exposition of the more explicit content of these conditions is set forth in Human Nature.<sup>1</sup> What follows here is a brief summary.

1. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God." This perfect faith is the first requirement, just as unbelief is the primal sin. Without such faith, man's freedom is intolerable, and he is so preoccupied with his anxieties that he cannot love. This requirement is coterminous with the faith and hope of the Pauline triad. Hope is faith with regard to the future. Man needs this trust to comprehend the seeming irrationalities of history and view them as divine wisdom. "Be not anxious," though, is no simple possibility. Freedom from anxiety is from "before the Fall." This trust

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<sup>1</sup> Human Nature, pp. 289-295.



and serenity is a part of the original perfection man does not have, but knows he ought to have. Although it seeks it differently, Stoicism pays tribute to this same requirement of man's life.

2. "With all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind." This inward health is a state of accord within the soul. The sinful soul does nothing with all its heart and soul and mind. The anxious self has inner contradictions, and operates in obedience rather than love to God, with resulting tension. Although sinful life is self-centred, it can never quite persuade itself that self is the true centre, with consequent disharmony within. There is always the memory of harmony, a perfect inner harmony that is a derivative of perfect communion with God. The awareness that obedience that is less than love is not normal is Justitia Originalis. It is the recognition that there ought not to be an ought.

3. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." This, too, is a derivative of faith and trust in God. Otherwise man is so inhibited by anxiety that his concern for his own security comes between himself and his neighbor. This is one facet of Justitia Originalis, and is its final form. Soul really gets through to soul only by way of God. Where the love of God does not undergird, differences prevail. Love is thus the end term of any system of morals. In it all systems of justice are fulfilled and negated.

#### Original Righteousness: Its Transcendent Character

Niebuhr argues that Justitia Originalis, the law of love as the requirement of man's life, contradicts pessimistic views of human nature. It is necessary, in contradiction of utopianism, to recognize that the fulfillment of this original righteousness is no simple possibility. Although love is the law of freedom, man is not completely free, being bound by history, nature and sin. The complexities of human geography and other limiting conditions prevent any historic structure of justice capable of fulfilling or implementing the law of love. Man's sin prevents him from seeing the needs of others. He also resists the claim of their necessities upon him.

The distinction between the ideal and the actual must be kept clear. Catholic thought has tended to make this distinction too complete, as the ideal and actual are really inextricable in practice. Thus, the absolute moral law demands complete liberty, complete justice, etc., while







relative moral law enunciates conditions and exceptions. Although the relative moral law corresponds to experience, utopians disregard it.

Utopianism is both dangerous and impractical. The law of love is an ultimate and not an immediate possibility. Men are not made good by simple persuasion. The eighteenth-century secular utopians thought that "liberty, equality and fraternity" was not only the law of nature but also the actuality of nature. Utopianism, both secular and religious, has brought confusion.

To the question "Can Justitia Originalis be realized in history?" there is no simple answer. Pre-Reformation Christianity said "Yes! through grace." The Reformation, however, took sin as perennial. Grace was regarded not so much as divine power as divine forgiveness. Thus Reformation Protestantism repudiated Roman Catholic optimism. Modern Protestantism, however, repudiates both Roman Catholic and Reformation pessimism. This is more in line with the Renaissance view of human nature and history as a realm of unbounded possibilities. Implicit in the Renaissance thinking is a false idea of progress. In Reformation thought, however, all distinctions of good and evil are eliminated on the level of divine judgment.

Some of the confusions of modern culture about human nature grow out of the unresolved contradictions of Renaissance and Reformation. Other confusions grow out of the Renaissance general triumph over the Reformation in all but a few backwaters and eddies of modern culture. A continuing problem: How and to what extent may Renaissance and Reformation insights about human nature be brought in fruitful inter-relation?

### Educational Implications

In the material surveyed in this chapter, Niebuhr has considered human nature from the standpoint of man's transcendence, his finiteness and his sin, culminating in the affirmation of man's "original" or basic and essential righteousness. This has involved discussion of the four traditional doctrines relating to man as image of God, man as creature, original sin and original righteousness. It may occur to the reader that the charge that these doctrines are irrelevant is rather superficial. Would it not be more accurate to say that each of them deals with an actual aspect and perennial problem of human life? To relate these



doctrines meaningfully to education is the task: to recognize in the mythological context a pertinent statement about human nature and human need and to apply it effectually.

Whether they agree with the doctrines or not, presumably educational leaders will be concerned that these ideas receive full and fair treatment in the educational process. The procedure which seems to elicit most general agreement is for curricular inclusion for study on a comparative basis and from an historical point of view. This appears to be fair minded and feasible, and is done to some extent. It is possible, though, that zealous secularists have evaded and thwarted even this process and objective by subtle curricular manipulation, inclusions and exclusions, leaving the student with the impression of the unimportance and irrelevance of Christianity.

Even the fairest curricular inclusion, however, does not deal with the whole question. The Christian doctrines, or ideas about human nature, just discussed, are not merely historical items, but are components of a dynamic, life-changing gospel that, in its varied impacts, may be unsettling, morally challenging, judgemental, therapeutic and revolutionary. The controversial element is not really on the level of credibility, although many literalists and their opponents never get beyond this threshold controversy. The real conflict revolves around the moral impact of this gospel at the center of man's life. How complete and adequate can an educational process be which ignores these questions? How fair or unbiassed is it if it deals with them only from the standpoint of a secular psychology and philosophy, and ignores the Christian analysis and proposals?

On the other hand, how can a secular institution present this gospel? How fairly or effectively will the Christian gospel be interpreted by one who is not a Christian and who does not place value upon or credence in these doctrines? Does not the very nature of the gospel preclude neutrality? As Jesus himself said, either one is for it or against it.<sup>1</sup>

There would appear to be little objection in principle to the inclusion of the Biblical faith as a body of subject matter, to be treated objectively from the standpoint of history and sociology. Perhaps the two difficulties

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<sup>1</sup>Matt. 12:30 (A. V.)







would be to find teachers competent both from the standpoint of scholarship and personal attitude, and to cope with those unreasonable fringe elements in society who cannot broaden their own personal position enough to accommodate to any area of consensus. Even if such curricular inclusion should be accomplished satisfactorily, it would be only a partial and secondary contribution to solution of the problem of moral development as an educational aim. For Christianity to be an effective influence, it must be treated not as a complex and peculiar historical and sociological phenomenon, but as an interpretation of life, a value judgement upon behaviour, and a proposal to influence thought and action. In other words, to present the gospel as the gospel is the work of a Christian who believes it and desires to share it. This is the function of the church.



## CHAPTER IV

### WHAT IS THE FULFILLMENT OF MAN'S LIFE?

#### Introduction

Is there a fulfillment? Does history "go anywhere" or have any meaning? Niebuhr's Human Destiny is concerned largely with an interpretation of the Christian answer to these questions. Whereas the first volume, Human Nature, credited man with greater spiritual stature and less virtue than some other schools of thought ascribe to him, the second volume emphasizes a dynamic conception of history, but is more sceptical of historical outcomes than some widely held modern views. Niebuhr's view is that Christian insights into the meaning of life and Christian resources of power for fulfilling life are greater than modern thought has assumed. Through the study of history one gains perspective upon man and the meaning of his life. "To brood either anxiously or with studied and learned serenity upon the fact that man is as 'the grass which flourisheth in the morning and in the evening is cut down and withereth' is to reveal the whole dimension of existence which distinguishes man from the animal world."<sup>1</sup>

Man, as a creature, is involved in the flux of nature and time. As a free spirit, he knows the brevity of his years and transcends his life span, both before and after, with his thought. Through this transcendence of nature, man has the capacity to make history. While history is rooted in nature, it is something more than determined sequence or capricious variation. History is compounded of natural necessity and human freedom. Through ability to grasp a span of time in consciousness man can both know and make history. At every point of history man is both bound by natural necessity and yet able to imagine a more ultimate possibility. In the midst of every conflict, man can look beyond to the ultimate reign of order and peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume II, Human Destiny, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943, p. 1.





The non-historical religions see history only as part of the meaningless natural flux in which man is temporarily immersed and from which he is to be freed. The goal is escape into an eternity which is not only the end but the negation of history. Finitude is evil. Religions which regard history as meaningful do not see man's involvement in nature and time as evil. The evil is rather man's attempt to deny or escape history's uncertainties and claim a freedom and transcendence which is not possible. Thus the problem of sin is related to the basic problem of life.

Hence the temporal problem of human history and destiny in historical religions is: how the transcendent meaning of history is to be disclosed and fulfilled, since man can discern only partial meanings and can only partially realize the meanings he discerns. In modern corruptions of historical religions, this problem is solved very simply by the belief that the cumulative effects of history will endow weak man with both the wisdom and the power to discern and to fulfill life's meaning.<sup>1</sup>

### Human Destiny and History<sup>2</sup>

The more profound historical religions recognize that at no point does man overcome his finiteness or complete his life. History always remains rooted in nature-necessity while at the same time pointing towards transcendent and trans-historical ends. Historical religions are "prophetic-Messianic," looking towards a point in history and, finally, the end of history, where life's meaning will be disclosed and fulfilled. In the fulfillment God purges and cancels out man's vain and premature efforts to fulfill history in his own way.

Historical religions regard life as potentially meaningful and expect this full meaning to be disclosed in a Christ or Messiah. Non-historical religions explain life in terms of nature or supernature and regard any transcendent disclosure of meaning as both unnecessary and impossible. These expect no Christ. This classification of religions is from a Christian standpoint and is based upon Christian presuppositions.

It is necessary to look first at the non-historical cultures that regard

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup>Material based upon chapter i of Human Destiny.



Christ "as foolishness" because they do not ask the questions for which Christ is the answer and do not have hopes or expectations for which his Cross is the fulfillment. Non-historical faiths look at life from one of two perspectives. Either they regard nature as the reality to which man must adjust or they regard nature as meaningless and chaotic, looking for man's emancipation either through reason or some higher unity within man. Stoicism tries to combine these two. Some philosophies are ambivalent, "but the two most consistent methods of denying the meaningfulness of history are to reduce it to the proportions of nature or to regard it as a corruption of eternity."<sup>1</sup> Thus, according to Niebuhr, do non-historical religions either seek to reduce life's meaning to that of the natural order or to escape the meaninglessness by reliance upon "pure reason," or "pure eternity."

#### History Reduced to Nature

For a consistent view of naturalism it is necessary to go back to classical materialism, because modern naturalism usually contains surreptitious elements of a Hebraic-Biblical view, with some interpretation of history smuggled in. A well-known example of this, says Niebuhr, is the interpretation of evolution in terms of the idea of progress in history. Classical thought consistently reduces history to the proportions of nature. The reality of history is reduced to meaningless natural sequence. Classical thought about death typically expresses naturalism. The cycle of life and death bears witness to the meaningless cyclical character of history.

Yet is not the very fear of death also an expression of that in man which transcends nature, that which does have "preeminence above a beast," enabling man both to anticipate death and to concern himself with the possibility of some dimension of reality beyond death? Because his mind can comprehend the point in nature at which his own existence ends, his transcendence of nature is indicated. Thus the fear of death is a negative witness to man's transcendence of it.

Classical naturalism would beguile man from the fear of death by denying the reality of history and by pointing out that after death there is nothing and therefore nothing to fear. "The effort of classical naturalism to reduce history to the proportion of nature is, in short, abortive.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 7.







It annuls the very meaning of life by its disavowal of history."<sup>1</sup>

### History Swallowed up in Eternity

Christ is, in Paul's words, "to the Greeks foolishness" because the idea of fulfillment of history's meaning is a useless idea to Greek thought, which seeks after wisdom and does not look for a Christ. It finds a Christ in every man, the logos principle. Man is to be emancipated from history. Thus do classical idealism and mysticism appreciate the transcendent freedom of the human spirit, while failing to do justice to its organic involvement in the temporal process. "The natural and temporal process is merely something from which man must be emancipated. That emancipation is the very fulfillment of the meaning of life. There is no yearning for fulfillment in history; there is only a desire to be freed from history."<sup>2</sup>

This is Platonism, regarding history as either inferior or illusory, a prison house to be exchanged for the Absolute Good, the world of changeless essence underlying the changing world. Such a philosophy leads eventually to replacing concern for history with mystical techniques which endeavor to unite the soul with the Absolute. This is an exercise of "soul cultivation" even higher than reason. "This," in Niebuhr's words, "is to say that Platonism finally culminates in neo-Platonism in the history and logic of otherworldly and non-historical cultures."<sup>3</sup>

So, in Plotinus the soul rises to an eternity of undifferentiated unity swallowing up all particularity, even the memory of personality. The end of life becomes the annulment of history and of the self in history. The non-historical cultures of the oriental world, Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism differ from Western classical non-historical tradition mainly in that they are more mystical and less rationalistic in their disavowal of history's meaningfulness. Only mystical forms of otherworldliness are completely consistent in their denial of historical meaning. In the western non-historical cultures there are always tangents of thought affirming history, recognizing that reason is a principle of order in history and showing the ambivalence of western thought on the subject.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 11.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 13.



### Where a Christ Is Expected

Only where history is regarded as potentially meaningful is it possible for a Christ to gain acceptance as a revealer of divine sovereignty or vindicator of divine purpose. Only those looking for meaning in history will find it in Christ. Because of their view of history as meaningless, a Christ must always be "foolishness to the Greeks." He must inevitably be a "stumbling block to the Jews" insofar as their expectation is so typically tinged with egoistic elements. Thus, there can be no Christ were he is not looked for, and his coming is, inevitably, a disappointment because those who await him are invariably influenced by their own egoistic preconceptions and expectations. In every culture which takes history seriously, there will be some degree of Messianism. It was found in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia and even in Rome. The Roman Messianic age was to be a restoration of primitive goodness.

There are three levels of Messianism: the egoistic-nationalist, the ethical-universalistic and the supra-ethical.

1. Egoistic-nationalistic Messianism looks forward to the fulfillment of history's meaning in the triumph of a particular nation or empire. The threat is recognized in the awareness that the nation is more finite than its pretensions will admit. Even the highest forms of Messianism do not entirely escape this egoistic corruption as the divine vindication of the believer over the unbeliever is looked for.

2. Ethical universalism is the second level of Messianism. Here it is not the triumph of our people that constitutes the fulfillment of history, but the vindication of good over evil. This redemption is looked for in the person of the Messianic "shepherd king," a symbol central to Egyptian and Babylonian as well as Hebraic Messianism. The shepherd king, however, is no earthly Caesar. It is recognized that only God can perfectly combine power and goodness. Therefore the Messiah must be a god become earthly king. But perfect goodness cannot be manifested in power, but only in the disavowal of power. It is this fact that makes the true Christ inevitably a disappointment to those who look for his coming with power into the particularities of history.

3. Prophetic Messianism sees history from a universal rather than national perspective. In Hebrew history this begins with Amos, from







whose insights come the ethical-universalistic note. There is, however, a yet more profound emphasis in this prophetic Messianism. In addition to universalism, there is criticism of optimistic Messianism. It is clearly recognized that there is no "special security." This may be regarded as the real beginning of revelation in the history of religion.

It is the beginning of revelation because here, for the first time, in the history of culture the eternal and divine is not regarded as the extension and fulfillment of the highest human possibilities, whether conceived in particularistic or universalistic terms. God's word is spoken against both his favored nation and against all nations. This means that prophetism has the first understanding of the fact that the real problem of history is not the finiteness of all human endeavors, which must wait for their completion by divine power. The real problem of history is the proud pretension of all human endeavors, which seeks to obscure their finite and partial character and thereby involves history in evil and sin.<sup>1</sup>

Here human culture is transcended and revelation, with its correlate of faith, begins. It must be by faith because "man can transcend himself sufficiently to know that an ultimate word may be spoken against him; but he cannot himself speak that word."<sup>2</sup>

There is no gradual evolution from nationalism to universalism in Messianism. Universalism is present in Amos and nationalism was rampant in Jesus' day. The basic prophetic question becomes one concerning the meaning of history: "how history can be anything more than judgment, which is to say, whether the promise of history can be fulfilled at all."<sup>3</sup>

In prophetic Messianism, then the problem of history is seen in the "recognition that all history is involved in a perennial defiance of the law of God."<sup>4</sup> The prophetic faith is that "the consummation of history can only be in a divine mercy which makes something more of history than merely recurring judgment."<sup>5</sup> The real question is not how God overcomes evil, but "how God will complete history by overcoming the perennial evil in every human good."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.25.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp.25-26.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.27.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.29.    <sup>5</sup>Ibid.    <sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.30.



Hebraic Messianism, although able to rise from particularism to universalism found the true Christ a stumbling block because it could not face this ultimate issue. One reason was the preoccupation of the Hebrews with their own fate. This is a perennial human problem: how to explain the obvious injustices of any given short span of history. The other reason was the plausible device of substituting "the righteous" for a given race or nation and expecting their triumph and vindication. Here human pride and pretension enter the picture once more.

### The Meaning of Life and History<sup>1</sup>

Christianity finds the meaning of life and history in Christ. His character and the epic of his life, death and resurrection are the long-awaited revelation of God's sovereignty over life and history. Christ is the disclosure of the power and will which governs history. In him partly hidden meanings become clear.

Prophetic Messianism looks for the meaning of history in the revelation of God's sovereignty. The meaning of life transcends history. History is dependent upon the revelation of God's sovereignty for its meaning and cannot of itself explain life's meaning. Each individual finds life's meaning partially in history and partially beyond history. God is looked for both in and beyond the historical process. The ultimate problem is stated in terms history cannot solve. "Each life and each portion of history are found to stand in proud and rebellious contradiction to the divine and eternal purpose; which means that only a transcendent mercy can overcome this contradiction."<sup>2</sup>

Because history is involved in flux and change, the appearance of a Christ in history claiming to represent a disclosure of the eternal is necessarily foolishness. The Christian faith accepts the paradox of man and history in its declaration that such a disclosure of the eternal is both possible and necessary. Man, in the greater aspects of his freedom, is too finite to comprehend the eternal. On the other hand, in his deepest involvement with nature, he is too free of it to be blind to the possibilities of the eternal.

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<sup>1</sup>Based upon Human Destiny, chap. ii.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 36.







### Jesus' Own Reinterpretation

The Christian belief that Jesus was the Christ who fulfilled the expectations of the ages was in contradiction to the beliefs and expectations of contemporary prophetic Messianism, which was then in the period of its culmination. Jesus had to negate, transform and fulfill this expectation.

#### Jesus' rejection of Hebraic legalism

According to the Gospels, Jesus' main conflict was with legalism. This was, in a sense, the final conflict in Hebraism between legalism and Messianism. These trends had been complementing and contradicting each other throughout Hebrew history. Hebraism had settled upon the keeping of the decalogue as central to the covenant between God and Israel. So well developed was this legalism that it became "type and symbol of every form of legalistic religious consciousness which binds the counsels of God prematurely to a law which is contingent to time and place."<sup>1</sup> By continuous Talmudic reinterpretations and extensions the effort was made continually to "up-date" the Torah where it was seen to be inadequate to new situations. This, however, did not overcome the original error of endeavoring to express the eternal in terms of the contingent.

New Testament criticism of legalism, says Niebuhr, is threefold. (1) Law cannot do justice to the freedom of man in history. (2) Law cannot do justice to the complexities of human personality and motivation. (3) Law cannot restrain evil. Human nature is such that man makes the keeping of the law both a screen for and an instrument of his own wrong doing and an occasion of sinful pride.

Underlying these criticisms of legalism is the assumption of the dimension of eternity, a knowledge of the depth of good and evil in man and a realization of the futility of trying to fix man's moral life in a code or confining human vitalities to any system. The force of these Christian criticisms of legalism does not render the Christian tradition immune to recurring legalism. To seek security in codes and systems is a human tendency.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 39.



### Jesus' rejection of nationalistic particularism

It is true that Jesus explicitly rejected nationalism. This is sometimes taken though, as his most important emphasis or final achievement. It is regarded so by modern interpretations of Christianity which see in Jesus only the culmination of a process of moral development. Even so, Christianity's final purging of nationalistic particularism comes only with Paul's assertion of his right to preach to the Gentiles, his rejection of the Jewish law for Christians, and his substitution of church for nation as the "Israel of God."

### Jesus' rejection of the answer of Hebraic Messianism

The problem to which Hebraic Messianism sought the answer was that of the vindication of the righteous over the unrighteous. "Why do the righteous suffer?" Jesus answers the deeper question of the contradiction of the divine will by human history on every level. Jesus teaches that at no point are the righteous immune to judgment. On every level of achievement they become involved in some further refinement of unrighteousness. "The final enigma of history is therefore not how the righteous will gain victory over the unrighteous, but how the evil in every good and the unrighteousness of the righteous is to be overcome."<sup>1</sup> This note Jesus adds to current apocalyptic views of the last judgment, but with inevitable offense to current Messianism. The suffering servant figure refers to the nation and is not Messianic until Jesus appropriates it unto himself. This was a synthesis Jesus made. "The synthesis represents something more than the collation of two hitherto unrelated concepts, the one Messianic and the other quasi-Messianic. It represents a profound reinterpretation of the meaning of history."<sup>2</sup>

If vicarious suffering is the "key to history," it may be interpreted in two ways. The conclusion drawn by liberal Christianity is an optimistic one: the power of the cross finally overcomes evil in the world. The other answer is that vicarious love, as represented in the suffering servant remains defeated and tragic in history. It has its triumph in the knowledge that it is ultimately right and true. This, however, still leaves the problem of evil unsolved. Does wickedness go unpunished and suffering unrelieved forever? Jesus' answer comprehends both the optimism

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 43.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 45.







of the first view and the tragic implications of the second. God takes the sins of the world upon and into himself.

This is to say that the contradictions of history are not resolved in history; but they are only ultimately resolved on the level of the eternal and the divine. However, the eternal and the divine which destroys evil is not some undifferentiated eternity which effaces both the good and evil of history by destroying history itself. God's mercy must make itself known in history, so that man in history may become fully conscious of his guilt and his redemption. The Messiah must give his life 'a ransom for many.'<sup>1</sup>

### Jesus' reinterpretation of the End

The "End," in prophecy and apocalypse, has two meanings: disclosure of meaning and culmination. Niebuhr points out that "Jesus, in effect, attributed the qualities of the suffering servant to his first coming and the qualities of the triumphant Son of man to a second coming . . ."<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr maintains, with C. H. Dodd, that the concept of a 'second coming' is an integral part of the Christian interpretation of history and of New Testament thought. History is seen as an interim between the Kingdom of God which has come and is to come. Jesus contradicts modern liberal interpretations of the power of love in history. He does not contend that the preaching of the Gospel will banish evil from history. Love must remain suffering love throughout a history which witnesses the growth and waxing of evil as well as good.

The New Testament view of history, Niebuhr explains, is that history since the time of Christ is an interim. The true meaning was disclosed in Christ, but the fulfillment is yet to come. The present situation is that, through Christ, sin has been overcome in principle, but not in fact. "Love must continue to be suffering love rather than triumphant love. This distinction becomes a basic category of interpreting history in all profound versions of the Christian faith, and has only recently been eliminated in modern sentimentalized versions of that faith."<sup>3</sup>

The length of the interim, erroneously conceived by Jesus, Paul and the early Church as "short" actually gives that illusion in conveying the truth that the final fulfillment impinges upon the present moment, creating a sense of urgency in man's relation to it. Niebuhr believes Schweitzer's

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.46.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.48.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.49.



idea of an "interim ethic" is mistaken when given as justification for the absolute character of that ethic. Jesus' moral absolutism is not so stated because of short-term feasibility but because it conforms to the actual constitution of man and history. Man's transcendent freedom over time and nature makes the final harmony of the moral absolute of love the ultimate norm of his existence. Yet this is corrupted and compromised by the contingencies and necessities of his actual life as he seeks to escape his finiteness and deny his dependency. The idea of the interim expresses the Christian understanding that the limitations and corruptions of history are not finally normative for man. "Thus reconstructed, the idea that history is an 'interim' between the first and second coming of Christ has a meaning which illumines all the facts of human existence."<sup>1</sup>

Understood symbolically, the thought of an imminent second coming takes on its full relevancy as it points up for man the reality and proximity of death at all times. Instead of the threat of meaninglessness at extinction, however, "to understand life and history according to the meaning given it by Christ is to be able to survey the chaos of any present or the peril of any future without sinking into despair. It is to have a vantage point from which one may realize that momentary securities are perennially destroyed both by the vicissitudes of history and by the fact of death which stands over all history."<sup>2</sup>

It is in connection with the interpretation of the New Testament idea of the "end," as well as in dealing with such New Testament concepts as resurrection and judgment that Niebuhr reiterates the importance of taking Biblical symbols not literally but seriously. To take them literally is incompatible with the Biblical conception of a dialectical relation between history and super-history. Taken literally, their fulfillment becomes merely an addition to time-history. If they are not taken seriously, however, the concept of eternity which remains is a negative one in which history is not fulfilled but destroyed and the Biblical dialectic is meaningless.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 51.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 51-52.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 50.







### Christ, the Wisdom and Power of God

With the principle of taking symbolic language seriously rather than literally in mind, Niebuhr stresses the central meaning of some key Christian concepts. The reference to Christ as "the express image of his person" (Heb. 1:13) has a meaning far beyond the connotations of anthropomorphism or hypostatization. It is that the life and death of Christ afford a profound insight into the meaning of life and history. Christ's handling of life is seen to be the "wisdom of God" for man, and in the influence of his sacrificial love upon mankind is recognized the "power of God." Here is the wisdom and power which undergirds history, and here is the clarification, for man, of the character of God. "He has a resource of mercy beyond His law and judgment but He can make it effective only as He takes the consequences of His wrath and judgment, upon and into Himself."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, in Niebuhr's view, such a term as "the wrath of God" takes on meaning and relevance when it is seen, not as some holdover from anthropomorphism, but as a symbolic expression of the fact that when the essential structure of life is violated, there is a reaction. When man, through egotism, defies the law of life, which calls for mutuality and love, suffering and chaos follow. "It is the law of life as love, which the egotism of man defies, a defiance which leads to the destruction of life."<sup>2</sup> Thus, in consequence of his defiance, man experiences "the wrath of God."

Niebuhr next discusses the Christian claim that the individual gains both wisdom and power for living from the "wisdom of God" and the "power of God" as God is known through the crucified Christ. Here life and history find their true end and meaning, and their fulfillment. This mediation of Christ to the individual, though, is an inward appropriation. It frees the individual to live a life of serenity and creativity.

Hellenistic interpretations of the gospel were answers to the questions of the Hellenistic world. They were concerned with the problem of finiteness. They took from the gospel the affirmation that the gap between the finite and the infinite can be bridged. Thus Greek thought exhausted itself on an un-Greek answer to a Greek problem. This led

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 55.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 56.



to the later stress upon the theology of Incarnation in Catholic and Anglican thought. More important is the content of the divine disclosure: "the knowledge of the mercy and the justice of God in their paradoxical relationship, in other words, the Atonement."<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr considers that Hellenistic Christianity committed an error in relegating the Atonement to a minor place and in being so preoccupied with combatting Greek scepticism. In Greek thought not sin but finiteness was the problem. Another error of Greek Christian thought was the effort to state the Incarnation in metaphysical terms. This is not the approach to the knowledge of God in Christ. Hellenistic metaphysics means, rather, "that an ultimate truth, transcending all human wisdom and apprehended by faith, is transmuted into a truth of human wisdom and incorporated into a metaphysical system."<sup>2</sup> This led on to the Christological controversies of the first Christian centuries, and to the creeds of Chalcedon and Nicaea, defying Greek thought, but doing it in Greek terms, with the formula of the two natures of Christ. Hellenistic Christianity insisted upon stating in terms of speculative reason something which is really a truth of faith, to be expressed symbolically. Insistence upon ascribing both divinity and humanity to Christ in a metaphysical formula, attributing both finite and infinite, conditioned and unconditioned qualities to his nature is to verge upon logical nonsense. "But the logical nonsense is not as serious a defect as the fact that the statement tends to reduce Christian faith to metaphysical truths which need not be apprehended inwardly by faith."<sup>3</sup>

This trust in metaphysical "truths" prevents and aborts the real Christian experience. It does so because the concentration upon metaphysics distracts attention from the central need, which is that individual self esteem be shattered, false security exposed, and anxiety brought to the point of despair. "Out of such despair contrition is born; and of contrition faith is conceived; and in that faith there is 'newness of life,' which is to say, 'power'."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 59.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 60.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 61.    <sup>4</sup>Ibid.







### The Foolishness of God and the Wisdom of Men

In I Corinthians, Chapters 1 and 2, Paul speaks of Christ crucified as "the foolishness of God which is wiser than men" and which turns out to be "the power of God and the wisdom of God." Niebuhr suggests that these Pauline paradoxes throw light upon the relationship of revelation to human culture. The truth revealed in the Cross could not have been anticipated in human culture or by human wisdom. The true Christ does not fulfil human expectations and does not fit into the perspectives of human wisdom. Man, individually and in nations, motivated by pride, seeks life's meaning and completion in terms of human virtue and achievement, and corrupts life's meaning in the attempt. When Christ is accepted, however, and life is interpreted in terms of this faith, history takes on new meaning. There are many suggestions of meaning in life and history, pointing beyond themselves. Often these are corrupted by premature solutions. The truth in Christ restores and clarifies perspective.

The truth as comprehended by faith exceeds human wisdom, but does not contradict experience. Rather it both illumines and is validated by experience. The human capacity for the apprehension of true wisdom is not annulled by human finiteness, corruption nor "ideological taint." The residual desire for true wisdom, the real God and an understanding of life's meaning persists beyond man's sinful tendency to build the world of meaning around himself. "It is this residual virtue which emerges in true contrition. Faith and contrition are so closely correlated because it is the apprehension of the truth beyond ourselves in faith which makes us contritely conscious of our previous effort to complete the structure of truth from within ourselves; and this contrition in turn validates the truth of faith."<sup>1</sup>

The affirmation that life and history are under the sovereignty of a hidden God is not a declaration that life and history are meaningless, but that they have a dimension deeper and higher than the system of nature, that the clarification of history's obscurities and contradictions is dependent upon a fuller disclosure of God's purposes, and that human explanations need correction because of their sinful elements. Prophetic and Christian interpretations imply the concept of a divine "personality."

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 63.



While subject to anthropomorphism, this is nevertheless a serviceable concept. "It connotes precisely that height of freedom on the one hand and that relation to organic process on the other which prophetic and Christian faith assumes in understanding God's transcendence over and his immanent relation to, the world."<sup>1</sup>

God's self-disclosure in Christ is regarded in Christian faith as God's final "word" to man. Niebuhr contends that the Atonement is precisely this final word because it discloses divine mercy, seen in relation to God's law and to the structure of the world, revealing the mercy of God in relation to the justice of God. "Because it is such foolishness, transcending human wisdom, it becomes, once accepted, the basis for a satisfactory total explanation of life."<sup>2</sup>

### The Possibilities and Limits of History<sup>3</sup>

In his estimate of the possibilities and limitations of history, Niebuhr is neither an individual perfectionist nor a social utopian. The possibilities and limits of history are more complex and difficult than this. It is through Christ that man is able to see both in the light of realism. When Christ is spoken of as the "second Adam," the language of Christian symbolism is affirming that, in Christian eyes, he is the norm of human nature. In him is personified the final perfection of man in history. Perfection, so conceived, is neither a sum total of virtues nor an absence of transgressions. It is the perfection of sacrificial love.

The fact that sacrificial love is sacrificial, ending inevitably upon a cross indicates the limits upon man's efforts to achieve perfection.

From the standpoint of history mutual love is the highest good. Only in mutual love, in which the concern of one person for the interests of another prompts and elicits a reciprocal affection, are the social demands of historical existence satisfied. The highest good of history must conform to standards of coherence and consistency in the whole realm of historical vitality. All claims within the general field of interests must be proportionately satisfied and related to each other harmoniously. The sacrifice of the self for others is therefore a violation of natural standards of morals, as limited by historical existence.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 66.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 67.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., chap. iii.    <sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 68-69.







Self-sacrifice for others is psychologically impossible for life conceived only in terms of nature-history. If self is identified with physical existence the gospel ethic of losing one's life to find it can have no meaning. Its meaningfulness depends upon a dimension of life transcending historical existence. Sacrificial love represents a tangent towards "eternity." Nevertheless, historical ethics depend upon it for support, for self-regard paralyzes the establishment of any relationships of mutual affection. Mutuality is not achieved by directly aiming at it. Sacrificial love thus underlies mutual love in a manner illustrative of the relationship of super-history to history.

This relation of sacrificial to mutual love is not exclusive to revealed religion and seen only in Christ. History affords many instances of the highest good transcending historical canons. The Cross, however, not only symbolizes this highest ethical norm but also has religious significance as a revelation of the relation of God to history, undergirding ethical life, preventing degeneration into egoistic utilitarianism and forestalling flight into mysticism. Such a salvation is the fruit of faith.

#### Sacrificial Love and the Sinlessness of Christ

The relationship of sacrificial to mutual love throws light upon the Christian doctrine of the sinlessness of Christ. It gives religious and moral meaning to the doctrine that Jesus was both human and divine, and eliminates the need for metaphysical plausibility, with its consequent absurdities. Metaphysical speculations begin with an absolute distinction between the historical and the eternal. This gap cannot be closed by more metaphysics. Niebuhr's interpretation, though, is that God is revealed in Christ and his Cross, not on metaphysical terms, but in the love which causes him to involve himself in the plight of free men who are in conflict with the structure of reality. Paradoxically, the love of Christ is both the highest human possibility and a revelation of God.

Thus, in Niebuhr's thought, the contrast between the human and the divine in Christ is not a metaphysical question. The divine goodness shows itself in the refusal to use power and thus enter the competitions and rivalries of men. All historical selves become involved in the competitions and comparisons of life. In Jesus, however, is a remarkable consistency of purpose and of act, with insistence upon uncompromising conformity to God's will irrespective of historical contingencies and



relativities. This consistency is not in conformity to a code but in the expression of selflessness. Human conduct is not helped by metaphysical or legalistic concepts of Christ's sinlessness. These describe a God-man who so transcends the conditions of human life as to make his norms irrelevant for mankind.

Beyond all metaphysical speculation, and the claims of "common sense," Christian faith sees in the perfection of the Cross the full expression and culmination of Christian ethics. The Christian interpretation of history is in terms of these same ethical implications of the Cross. It is only when the answer is available that men are able to frame the question as to the character of history. The Christian doctrine of Christ as normative man discloses tangents towards the eternal. As these are followed through in faith they are seen in their full aspect as revelation. "Without faith the ethical life of man is always haunted by the sceptical reflection that 'a living dog is better than a dead lion,' (Ecclesiastes 9:4), which is to say that all moral imperatives are limited by the survival impulse which lies at the foundation of historical existence."<sup>1</sup>

#### Innocency and the Perfection of Christ

To explain the concepts of innocency and the perfection of Christ, Niebuhr refers to New Testament symbolism, wherein innocency and perfection are spoken of as attributes of the "first" and "second" Adam<sup>2</sup> respectively. The innocency of "Adam" or "man" before the Fall is a primitive state to which sinlessness is ascribed because it precedes self-conscious activity. Man has not yet had the opportunity to act self-consciously, to make history and thus to sin. In this way the "first" Adam represents man's primitive condition.

While in one sense this may be thought of as a condition obtaining in some primitive pre-historic time, in its closer application it does not refer to an era that can be located on any time scale, but a recurrent episode in every human life. This interpretation unfolds in Niebuhr's subsequent argument. Both interpretations need to be held tentatively for examination: the thought of man's pre-historic innocency and the conception

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 76.    <sup>2</sup>I. Cor. 15:20-49, especially vs. 45, and Rom. 5:14, (A. V.)







of each individual's innocence "before the act." The first interpretation does not hold up. The second throws light upon the psychology and dynamics of human life as we experience it. It is necessary, too, to distinguish between this conception of innocence and that of perfection symbolized in the appellation "Second Adam" applied to Christ.

Christ as "essential man," the perfect norm of human character, is the meaning of Paul's expression "second Adam." In spite of fantastic interpretations of "original perfection," Christian thought best defines these lost possibilities of human nature in terms of the perfection of Christ. The latter, however, exceeds primitive perfection. "To say that the innocence of Adam before the Fall can be restored only in terms of the perfection of Christ is to assert that life can approach its original innocence only by aspiring to its unlimited end."<sup>1</sup>

Confusion results from the use of both "perfection" and "innocency" to describe man's original condition. "Innocency" better describes a primeval state as yet undisturbed by freedom, and from which historic virtue and evil emerge. (This is a line of thought from Irenaeus to Hegel.) The "Fall" and awakening self-consciousness necessarily precede virtue. "Innocency is thus the harmony of life with life without freedom. Mutual love is the harmony of life with life within terms of freedom; and sacrificial love is harmony of the soul with God beyond the limitations of sinful and finite history."<sup>2</sup>

There is no historic state of man in which freedom has not already begun to operate. Therefore it is not useful or possible to use primeval innocence as a point of reference. (This is what the eighteenth century naturalists tried to do). The ideal possibility of life, symbolized in the first Adam, cannot be expressed adequately except in terms of the "second Adam," with the connotations of "perfection" in the setting of freedom.

Contemporary scholars know more about primitive societies than did the eighteenth century philosophers. The romantically conceived harmonious state of nature in these societies has no basis in social history. Man as we know him has never lived in the frictionless harmony of the ant-hill. While gregariousness, consanguinity and the consciousness of the "primeval we" (Kunkel) held men together in a way organically related to animal herds and families, the emergence of primitive societies into

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<sup>1</sup>Human Destiny, p.77.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.78.



history finds them invariably committed to various stratagems to achieve and maintain unity. The very rigidity of primitive tribal social structure indicates the presence of individual tendencies towards freedom, and reflects the inability of primitive societies to deal with freedom by any other means than repression. So-called primitive innocence is, in fact, a state of incipient anarchy held in check by tyranny.

Where there is history at all there is freedom; and where there is freedom there is sin. Yet the mutualities of the primitive community are inexact symbols of the loving relation of life to life. There is a certain validity in the perennial inclination of men to focus upon the past, whether in terms of the prehistory of the human race, or in terms of some imagined innocence and simplicity in the life of their own nation, a symbol of the brotherhood which they intend to achieve in history.

The same symbolic inexactness becomes apparent in analysing the innocence of a child . . . A child is thus never completely innocent; and yet its innocence is an inexact symbol of the goodness towards which all life should move.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in the Christian symbolism of the "first" and "second" Adam, the character of human history is defined. To look back to prehistoric innocence is to recognize the partial basis of man's historic norms as being in the harmonious relation of life to life in nature. Its ultimate definition in terms of sacrificial love transcending history recognizes that human freedom over history is necessary to historical creativity. Yet man's actual achievements in history, his units of brotherhood are always corrupted by the twin evils of tyranny and anarchy. There is no pure ethical norm in history, nor any hope of achieving one.

The 'essential,' the normative man, is thus a 'God-man' whose sacrificial love seeks conformity with, and finds justification in, the divine and eternal agape, the ultimate and final harmony of life with life. Yet this eternal norm is not presented without a provisional glance at the primitive harmony of life in nature. The Christian faith appreciates what is valid in romantic primitivism as a part of the Christian affirmation of the goodness of creation. But the Christian interpretation of life and history has

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 80.







too lively a sense of the freedom which reaches into eternity to interpret life merely in terms of primitive innocence. To this innocence it relates the tragic perfection of the Cross.<sup>1</sup>

### The Perfection of Christ and the Possibilities of History

Just as the disclosure of the character of God and the meaning of history in Christ has a threefold relation to history as it completes, clarifies and corrects man's apprehensions of historical meaning, so the perfection of Christ, the transcendent agape symbolized in the Cross, has the same threefold function of completion, clarification and correction in relation to the ethical realities of history. Man's ethical norm, comprehended by examination of the facts and requirements of life in human society, is mutual love. This he learns both from experience and the demands of his own nature: that conflict within himself or with others is an evil. Thus, it is the insight of natural religion and morality that love is the law of life. (The exception is amongst religions that seek immediate flight from life.) It is in relation to these accepted norms of mutuality in history that the sacrificial love of Christ has a threefold relationship of completion, clarification and correction.

1. Sacrificial love (agape) completes the incompleteness of mutual love (eros) in that it goes beyond the latter's state of inhibited and arrested expression at the point where anxiety over reciprocation makes the self and the self's own happiness the norm. Where sacrificial love persists without thought of reward, mutuality is fostered.

While history does contain many achievements in the organization of brotherhood, resulting in mutuality, they are not inspired merely by mutuality. These rewards are too uncertain. The deeper pull is that of agape. The harmonies actually achieved always are partly borrowed from the eternal. "The uneasy conscience of man over various forms of social injustice, over slavery and war, is an expression of the Christian feeling that history must move from the innocence of Adam to the perfection of Christ, from the harmony of life with life in unfree nature to the perfect love of the Kingdom of God."<sup>2</sup>

2. The sacrificial love of Christ represents a transcendent norm

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 81.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 85.



which clarifies the ethical obscurities of history and points up the ethical possibilities in historical development. However the transcendent norm is defined, the tendency of the advocates of the norm is to regard it as a simple possibility, capable of being realized in history. Christian sectarians look to the power of sanctifying grace, secular liberals trust in the cumulative force of universal education and Marxists put their faith in a catastrophic reorganization of society, all believing in the possibility of lifting human life to the point where mutual love and selfless love have become one.

There is not, however, any guarantee given in the New Testament that the way of the Cross will prove an historical success. Jesus warned his disciples against the expectation of easy success. While some success may come, the anticipation of this is not the reason for adopting the way of agape. Its final justification is not in history but in the will of God. "Thus the Cross clarifies the possibilities and limits of history and perennially refutes the pathetic illusions of those who usually deny the dimension of history which reaches into Eternity in one moment, and in the next, dream of achieving an unconditioned perfection in history."<sup>1</sup>

3. The Cross corrects man's false pretensions of virtue and shows the contrast between human self-assertion and the divine agape. In particular the Cross symbolizes meanings which contradict and correct attempts to establish the truth in terms of a nation or culture. The Cross symbolizes the final goodness, contradicting all human attempts to establish human goodness through self-assertion. The Cross is a constant reminder of this corruption which permeates human life at all levels and in all areas, personal, political, social. At no level of history is the contradiction removed between divine agape and human egotism. "Recognition of this aspect of history has the distinction of being a unique Christian insight; for practically all other forms of interpreting history, whether classical or modern, whether mystical or legalistic, find some way of destroying the ultimate contradiction between the self-assertion of human life and the divine agape."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 88.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 90.







### The End of History<sup>1</sup>

All human history may be thought of as moving towards two ends; the purpose and goal of one's life and work (telos), and the termination, where that which exists ceases to be (finis). The problem is that finis always threatens telos. The Christian faith understands this tension between time and eternity, and recognizes man's inability to solve the problem. Evil is introduced into history by human efforts to solve this problem through the "false eternal" of human pride.

The Christian faith is that the disclosure of the Kingdom of God in Christ is an indication of the meaning of history. The full realization of that meaning, however, is yet to come. History as we know it is an interim between the disclosure and fulfillment of its meaning. This understanding by faith means that the world is already overcome by the person who so believes. This faith points to an end in which incompleteness and corruption are overcome.

### The New Testament Symbolism of the End

Niebuhr's statement here of the function of Biblical symbolism and the necessity of taking it not literally but seriously serves not only to illuminate Christian teaching concerning "last things," but also suggests the manner in which religious symbolism should be approached in any context. The significance of Biblical symbols is that, from the standpoint of the conditioned, they seek to give expression to the ultimate. To take "the Second Coming" literally reduces it to an event in history and nullifies the concept of a dialectical relationship between time and eternity. It settles for a millennial age which, like a utopian one, professes to fulfill history within the context of finiteness. Not to take this symbolism seriously, though, is to obscure or ignore a dimension of life and meaning simply because it is not understood. The symbol and pointer must be taken seriously, because it calls attention to an aspect of human aspiration and awareness that is influential and significant, even though not understood. "The eschata or 'last things' in New Testament symbolism are described in three fundamental symbols: the return of Christ, the last judgment and the resurrection. They must be considered in that order."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., chap.x.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.290.



### The Parousia (Christ's Return)

The return of the triumphant Christ really includes the other two symbols: judgment and resurrection. Christ's triumphant return at the end of history expresses the faith that existence ultimately cannot defy its own norm, even though sin may thwart love in history, turning it into suffering love. If this latter were the ultimate situation, though, it would be necessary to worship the power of sin in the world. The parousia is, above all, an expression of faith in the sovereignty of God and the ultimate supremacy of love over the forces of self love which temporarily defy and prevent the harmony of all things under God. This is not utopianism, which looks for the final consummation in this world. Nor is it otherworldliness, negating history. The parousia fulfills history, but at the end of time.

### The Last Judgment

As a New Testament symbol of "last things," the last judgment has three important aspects. The first is that Christ will be the judge of history. This means that the historical is judged by its own ideal possibilities and not by a contrast between the finite and the eternal. It is not finite existence that is evil. The second aspect is distinction between good and evil in history. Differences are not swallowed up in a distinctionless eternity. While historical distinctions are relative and ambiguous, this points to the necessity of an unambiguous final judgment. The third aspect of the last judgment is its locus at the "end" of history. No historical achievement can substitute for it. "The idea of a 'last' judgment expresses Christianity's refutation of all conceptions of history, according to which it is its own redeemer and is able by its process of growth and development, to emancipate man from the guilt and sin of his existence, and to free him from judgment."<sup>1</sup>

### The Resurrection

Most difficult of all for modern minds is the idea of "the resurrection of the body." Many seek to resolve this by turning to immortality of the soul. Actually, this is no more credible than resurrection. The conditions of historical existence make the concept of free transcendent

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 293.







spirit as implausible as that of a resurrected body.

Biblical faith is that the meaningfulness of history must be revealed and consummated and that this is manifestly beyond human power to accomplish. For this we must depend upon God. Yet this is no annulment of history but a fulfilling. Paradoxically, the "natural body" becomes a "spiritual body" yet remains a body.<sup>1</sup> This is something beyond both man's understanding and his power.

Difficult as is this Christian doctrine, Niebuhr contends that it is less absurd than alternative attempts to fulfill life by man's inherent wisdom and capacities. This is something that must come from beyond ourselves. Man defeats his own ends when he attempts fulfillment in his own power and on his own terms. "The Christian answer is faith in the God who is revealed in Christ and from whose love neither life nor death can separate us."<sup>2</sup>

#### Eternity: The End and Meaning of History

Niebuhr uses the word "eternity" in such a way as to render superfluous the concept "supernatural." In its stead, Niebuhr sees eternity standing in a two-dimensional relation to time: over time and at the end of time. Eternity is that from which all dependent existence derives its power. Eternity is not, however, a separate order of existence, i.e., it is not super natural. It is the source and ground of the temporal. "The divine consciousness gives meaning to the mere succession of natural events by comprehending them simultaneously, even as human consciousness gives meaning to segments of natural sequence by comprehending them simultaneously in memory and foresight."<sup>3</sup>

Some acts have absolute significance, without regard to any historical consequence or difference, e.g., an act of martyrdom, ignored by the world, but having its own "absolute" significance. But history is also a continuum, in which every act takes its meaning from the total process.

#### The Diversity and Unity of History

Partial realizations and fulfillments are seen in the rise and fall of civilizations and cultures. Each civilization or other historical configuration (family, culture, etc.) may be thought of as having its

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<sup>1</sup>I Cor., 15:44.    <sup>2</sup>Human Destiny, p.295.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.299.



own integral significance. This interpretation is in line with Ranke's principle of historical interpretation: the equidistance of all temporal events from the eternal. This is the pluralistic interpretation of history, as developed by such writers as Spengler and Toynbee.

Yet, notes Niebuhr, even pluralistic interpretations look for comprehensive meaning. Spengler finds processes of nature the key to historical growth and decay. All civilizations pass through ages analagous to spring, summer, fall and winter. Freedom is illusory or very contingent. Toynbee links the decline of civilization to mistakes and failures in meeting new challenges.

History, though, should not be viewed simply in terms of the decline of civilizations. If they die in the end, they also live, bearing witness to the creativity of history as well as its sin. In their weak beginnings, their strength and their long-postponed, though well-deserved destruction, they show the divine longsuffering and providence. This is the prophetic view of history, with its emphasis upon the judgments and mercy of God.

For God's judgments are never precipitate and the possibilities of repentance and turning from the evil are many. According to the degree with which civilizations and cultures accept these possibilities of renewal, they may extend their life indeterminately. But at some point or other they make the fatal mistake, or a whole series of fatal mistakes. Then they perish; and the divine majesty is vindicated in that destruction.<sup>1</sup>

A valid interpretation of history can only be made from a vantage point outside the processes and involvements of any given historical period. The tendency of the historian is to interpret the entire process from the perspective of contemporary trends, thus being unduly pessimistic or optimistic, in keeping with the spirit of the age. History is more clearly seen by the eye of faith transcending the contingencies of time, discerning at least a measure of meaning even though the unity may be obscured to mortal eyes.

### The Individual and History

Niebuhr sees the individual as related to history in two ways. He is related to the historical process, inasmuch as his creativity is

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 305-306.







directed towards the service of an historical community. But he also seeks for the completion of the meaning of his life beyond the fragmentary realizations of that point in the historical process where he happens to live and die. While the end of his own life is, for him, the end of history, in his lifetime aims and perspectives, the individual is related to eternity.

To view the eternal fulfillment of individual life only from "above" is to destroy social and historical meaning. Individual life becomes an end in itself. This placement of the "end" above history emphasizes the individual as in a mystical fulfillment or orthodox protestant "other-worldliness." The other mistake is to try to fulfill the meaning of life in the historical process itself. This both obscures individual freedom in its transcendence over history and denies the finiteness of the historical process.

A broader view would link the individual with the historical process itself, as opposed to any particular historic community. Life is lived and sacrifices made for the sake of "posterity." Yet this tends to make "posterity" the surrogates for God. When we realize that we are the posterity referred to, the absurdity of the doctrine is made plain. It is true, nevertheless, that man's involvement in history comprises part of the meaning of his life.

The New Testament answer to the problem of the individual is given symbolically in the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. This does justice both to the value of individual life and to the meaningfulness of history for the individual, who participates in its consummation. This is more realistic than the concept of the immortality of the soul, which attaches eternal significance to an impersonal nous which becomes absorbed in eternity. The Christian doctrine, on the other hand, does justice to both the individual and social aspects of man. "The idea of the resurrection implies that the historical elaborations of the richness of creation, in all their variety will participate in the consummation of history. It gives the struggles in which men engage to preserve civilizations, and to fulfill goodness in history, abiding significance and does not relegate them to a meaningless flux, of which there will be no echo in eternity."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 312.



### The Unity of History

Christian faith is that history is meaningful, and not

. . . a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.<sup>1</sup>

It is rather, in Niebuhr's terms, a representation of a total realm of coherence, to be comprehended only from the standpoint of its own ultimate telos. Even without any philosophy or principle of interpretation, "tangents of coherence" and "minimal relations of unity" suggest themselves, making untenable any "consistently pluralistic conception of history."<sup>2</sup> No matter how many times the arts are lost and found, there is always a cultural minimum passed on from one civilization to another. An example of this is modern man's debt to the ancients. Civilizations also have relationships with other contemporary civilizations. As technical advance increases interdependence, the need for commensurate political instruments increases.<sup>3</sup>

Even though civilizations rise and fall, the pattern of history is one of growth. This is so even though one civilization may have to re-discover and reclaim what was once known by previous civilizations and forgotten. The process of history is towards more inclusive ends, more complex relations, "technical enhancement of human powers and the cumulation of knowledge."<sup>4</sup>

It is a modern assumption that growth means progress. Growth thus acquires a moral connotation. But history does not move inexorably from chaos to cosmos. In the more complex structures of civilization there is more scope for spiritual hatred and lethal conflict than in any primitive society. In the more complicated society there are more occasions for tension and more necessities for careful management.

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act V, Scene 5, lines 26-28.

<sup>2</sup> Human Destiny, p. 313.

<sup>3</sup> A full treatment of the inter-relatedness of cultures is found in Ralph Linton, The Tree of Culture, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1955. Linton uses the figure of the many-rooted banyan tree to illustrate the essential unity of man's diverse cultures.

<sup>4</sup> Human Destiny, p. 315.







This is to say that the growth towards such an ideal as world government is not an automatic "upward" development. World government is bound to be less stable than a well-knit nation, just as this in turn is more prone to disorder and disruption than tribe or family.

The fact that man has to contend with evil afresh on every new level of achievement is symbolized in the New Testament in the figure of Antichrist. An end towards which man moves, under the illusion of progress, is, when he arrives, not the unconditioned good he had anticipated, but is itself corrupt. The more deluded he is in equating growth with progress, the more he may be said to have succumbed to the worship of a false eternal, or Antichrist. The Antichrist is thought of both as "the final evil at the end of history"<sup>1</sup> and as delusions taking men unawares at various points in history.

Both Roman Catholic and literalistic Protestant concepts of the Antichrist have missed the mark. This figure stands neither for the enemies of Catholicism nor for any current political figure. The New Testament symbol is a necessary element in a full and balanced view of history. It represents the truth that the future is not a realm of greater security nor higher virtue than the present. "The Antichrist stands at the end of history to indicate that history cumulates, rather than solves, the essential problems of human existence."<sup>2</sup>

Evil does not have its own independent history. The evil appearing at the end of history is either a corruption of the final good or it is an explicit denial and defiance of that good. While its power is positive and active, evil is negative and parasitic in origin. Modern tyrannies, for instance, are not the end product and final refinement of a long history of tyranny. They are corruptions of a developed civilization whose mature technology affords more effective tools of tyranny.

Modern idolatrous religions, which conform so perfectly to the vision of the 'Beast' who demands religious worship for himself; and of the 'false Christs' who 'deceive the very elect' are not the final fruit of an independent history of idolatry. They are explicit forms of self-worship which gain their power by consciously defying higher religious and moral standards. Modern international anarchy is not the fruit of a long history

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 316.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 318.



of anarchy. It is, rather, the corruption and disintegration of a system of order. It is so terrible because it presupposes potential or actual mutualities on a larger scale than those achieved in previous civilizations.<sup>1</sup>

Thus is evil dependent upon good, the Antichrist either consciously defying the Christ or using the Christ as a cloak. The evil is a perversion or misuse of a good. Although negatively derived, its force in the world is positive. In its final form, symbolized as Antichrist, it so permeates history that its defeat can only be accomplished by the Christ who ends history.

The Christian claim for this New Testament interpretation, says Niebuhr, is simply that it fits the known facts of history which both ancient and modern philosophies have sought to obscure. Ancient philosophers either saw no meaning in history or the limited meaning of recurring cycles. Moderns have stressed history's unity and its cumulative trends, but have denied the perils and evils of these trends, thus making history itself the redeemer. These ancient and modern explanations reflect man's desire to complete his life under his own power. The ancients sought either emancipation of man's spirit from the flux of finiteness or subordination to that flux. Moderns look to history ("the social process") itself as that which will fulfill human life.

These devices, whether ancient or modern, are instances of man's inveterate pride. The measure of freedom man possesses tempts him to grasp for complete emancipation of spirit from nature. The growth so evident in history tempts him to mistake growth for progress. Both of these misapprehensions are partly "honest" mistakes and partly willful disregard of man's true state. The real facts of his life are that man does not have the power to do what idealists and mystics claim, and extricate himself from flux and finiteness. Equally false is the hope that history will solve man's basic problems. What it really does is present the same problems in new forms on new levels, heightened and more complex. "The belief that man could solve his problem either by an escape from history or by the historical process itself is a mistake which is partly prompted by the most universal of all 'ideological' taints:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 318-319.







the pride, not of particular men and cultures, but of man as man."<sup>1</sup>

Man's best foundation for an analysis of his own destiny is a religious faith which in principle has disavowed pride. It cannot be assumed, however, that any given expression of the Christian faith will escape the very pride which, in principle, it disavows. Nevertheless, it is the faith grounded in a security beyond all the "false eternals" of history which will turn men from these false securities to a trust in God whose love is expressed in Christ.

Thus wisdom about our destiny is dependent upon a humble recognition of the limits of our knowledge and our power. Our most reliable understanding is the fruit of 'grace' in which faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge; and in which contrition mitigates our pride without destroying our hope.<sup>2</sup>

#### A Christian's Belief about the Fulfillment of Life

If the preceding summary of Niebuhr's writings concerning the fulfillment of man's life be taken as representative of Christian belief about history and its meaning, what kind of person will be the product of such belief? What will be his moral outlook? What will be his ideas about the meaning of all life and his own life? What if a man be rooted and grounded in these Christian beliefs, not held blindly and unthinkingly as inherited dogmas, but thoughtfully and realistically? Assuming that a man's thinking does carry over into action, what will be his motivating ideas concerning life's purposes?

What if this man were to believe that "history," the unfolding world of human affairs, is "going somewhere," and that what happens is, somehow, significant? This means rejection of the idea that man is only an organism in a deterministic natural order. Nor would he regard this life as a prison house from which one day he would escape to some nirvana. What if he were to believe simply that this life, with its mystery, is a meaningful experience for which he should be thankful and to which he should give his best?

In this twentieth-century world, such a man will be assailed

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 320.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 321.



continuously by propaganda, social pressures, and subtle temptations of anxiety, fear and prejudice. What if, to counter all this, he understands that life is full of prophets and Messiahs? What if, because of the historical sophistication of his faith, he has the various Messianic movements classified for what they are? Such a man will not see purpose in history in terms of some racial, nationalistic or sectional Messiah. He will not even be taken in by a division of mankind into the righteous and the unrighteous. He will see mankind as a common brotherhood, all standing in need of forgiveness and help, not only from one another but, somehow, from a level above and beyond human confusion and blundering.

What if such a man were to accept not only the principle of mutuality as a basic human necessity, but were to dare to believe that even mutuality fails unless there are individuals capable of agape? What if he were to leaven his mutuality with agape, and to do so simply because of his belief that this, despite appearances to the contrary, is in the nature of things, and is not only a requirement laid upon him, but a privilege? What if, despite rebuffs and disappointments, he were to go on believing this way, understanding that agape is its own reward?

What if such a man were to have a "realistic" view of history and its possibilities, refusing to be carried away either by utopian social schemes or delusions of personal perfection? What if, with equal decision, he were to reject pessimism, accepting that life will not be ideal, but that problems can be solved and burdens borne, experiences of fellowship and nature enjoyed, and the final issue left with God?

What if such a man were to see through the "metaphysical fallacy," being neither deluded into indefensible speculative beliefs nor cynically discouraged because of the incredibility of these beliefs and the credulity of some people? What if he were to find his "revelation" in moral terms, not in his own righteousness, but in his own and humanity's need, aspiration, contrition and forgiveness?

What if he were to recognize that, no matter what his achievement, each new level of attainment brings not only its triumphs and opportunities, but also its temptations and more complicated problems? What if he were to have the insight to recognize, on each new level, the temptation of "the perverted good," the rationalized selfishness, the







evil masquerading as righteousness: the anti-Christ?

What if such a man were to keep in perspective both the telos and finis of life, and to give himself so wholeheartedly to the telos he discerns in the agape as not to be abashed at the thought of finis? What if, at the same time, he were to remember finis, and not to act or think presumptuously? What if he were to see in Christ and the way of the Cross, not an isolated incident, but an indication of the wisdom and redemptive power of God, and a sufficient clue as to the telos? What if he were to trust himself to life in these terms, even though the "wisdom of this world" would counsel otherwise?

What if such a man were to be keenly aware of his own, and all men's, limitations, seeing in Christ the ideal Man and in Christ's Cross the sign of God's forgiveness and love for mortals who never quite come up to the ideal? What if he were to believe that perfection is not a state of negative sinlessness, but a whole-hearted giving in selfless love? What if he were to have no delusions about his own, or any man's native innocence and, while avoiding complacency, find both renewal and power in his inward trust in the God whom he believes to be revealed in Jesus Christ?

What if he were to apprehend the meaning behind the symbol, and grasp, in the Second Coming, the Last Judgement and the Resurrection, the intimation that the ultimate norm of selfless love will prevail, that the distinction between good and evil will be made plain, and that eternity is not the annulment but the fulfillment of life?

What if faith and contrition were to mean more to him than arrogance, pride and self-seeking? What if he were aware of the difference between faith and credulity, and between trust in God's mercy and arrogant confidence in God's special favor?

What if this man's trust were not in any magical supernatural, but rather a quiet confidence in an enfolding, over-arching eternity, that is not "this world" and yet is not discontinuous with it? What if he were to recognize himself to be "in the hand of God," and undergirded by eternity, neither of which he can comprehend, much less define, but whose support he nonetheless recognizes on the level of faith?

What if a man were to believe, that in these terms, this present world has meaning, moves towards fulfillment, and asks of him his best? Would a man so believing and living be a bane or blessing to his fellow men? Would a child so encouraged to believe be misled?



## CHAPTER V

### HOW IS MAN'S FULFILLMENT ACCOMPLISHED?

#### Introduction

Moral development, amongst Protestants generally, is considered to be dependent upon what is commonly referred to as a "Christian experience," and expressed either as conversion or confirmation. While some groups emphasize this more than others, it is usually given a central position in a church's program in one of two ways. Some churches stress steady childhood nurture, beginning with infant baptism, at which parents assume responsibility for bringing up the child in the Christian way, and leading to an experience in early adolescence when the child is confirmed in the faith on his own responsibility. Other churches, while paying equal attention to childhood nurture, believe in a pattern of "crisis conversion," when the individual, as an adolescent or adult, "comes to Christ" on his own, after the manner of the conversion of "about three thousand souls" at Pentecost,<sup>1</sup> or the experience of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus.<sup>2</sup> Christian groups generally follow one or the other of these patterns, many tending to combine features of both procedures. While some groups are more formal than others, most pursue their program in a thoroughgoing manner. All regard this "Christian experience" as the basic and normative factor in moral development.

While this regeneration, or rebirth in Christ, is considered essential, moral development may not be regarded as its only or even as its chief aim. The prime objective is seen as salvation, the rescue of the hapless soul from sin. This may be deemed more important than moral development as such. That moral development follows, however, and results in "the Christian life" is the belief of most groups, and is especially characteristic of the Protestant groups for whom Niebuhr

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:41.    <sup>2</sup> Acts 9: 1-9.







is, perhaps, as representative a spokesman as may be found.

The way this morality develops is understood in the light of the Christian doctrine of "grace." Just how effectively Christianity can be "taught" in the schools depends greatly upon what is believed here. If the Roman Catholic view of grace is taken, church-centered schooling seems a logical procedure. If the evangelical Protestant conception of grace is upheld, "religion in the schools" becomes an impossible arrangement unless the school in question be very definitely a Christian school, completely integrated into the life and program of the church.

The problem becomes this: From the Protestant point of view, proper moral development is contingent upon Christian experience. This latter, however, is cultivated and brought to fruition mainly within the fellowship or through the ministrations of the church, as the gospel is proclaimed, heard and accepted. Moral development as such, however, goes on every day, everywhere in the world, and especially within the school. Whether the moral development within the school is "good" or "bad" depends upon who controls the school, and what philosophy or way of life is followed there. The product of the secular school will be morally developed, but not necessarily Christian. Regeneration in Christ has not taken place, indeed, may never have been heard of. Without this, in the view of Protestantism, moral development will be inadequate.

For the fulfillment of man's life, in evangelical Christian terms, regeneration in Christ is a pre-requisite. How this is so is the purpose of the enquiry into Niebuhr's thought in the present chapter. That the question is not one of fine-drawn theory and irrelevant theology, but one of social consequences is the theme of Chapter VI. The line of thought considered throughout continues to be that of the Christian viewpoint as understood by Reinhold Niebuhr.

#### The Incompleteness of Man

The Christian interpretation, as Niebuhr sees it,<sup>1</sup> is that man cannot fulfill the true meaning of his life and that sin comes from his efforts to do so. On the other hand the Christian gospel is that in Christ

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<sup>1</sup>The introductory portion of this chapter is based upon Human Destiny, chap. iv.



man finds the "wisdom" and "power" for that fulfillment; that in Christ the true meaning of life has been disclosed and the resources to fulfill it made available. This is the connotation of the New Testament term "grace."

Grace represents on the one hand the mercy and forgiveness of God by which He completes what man cannot complete and overcomes the sinful elements in all of man's achievements. Grace is the power of God over man. Grace is on the other hand the power of God in man; it represents an accession of resources which man does not have of himself, enabling him to become what he truly ought to be.<sup>1</sup>

This is another way of speaking of the gift of the "Holy Spirit." By this is meant not some ultimate development of the human spirit, but the spirit of God indwelling in man. This, however, is never at the expense of human selfhood. The Christian doctrines of "grace" and "Holy Spirit" contradict mystical and idealistic theories based upon the extension and purification of the human spirit. Thus is man's life fulfilled by resources not his own. Sin is man's abortive attempt to complete his life in his own wisdom and power.

It is by faith that man perceives a completeness and a holiness that is beyond himself. The same ability to recognize human limits opens the possibility of laying hold by faith of the resources of God beyond human limits. The Christian faith is not in "a supernal perfection to which man aspires"<sup>2</sup> but in "resources of love, wisdom and power, which come down to man."<sup>3</sup> This approach offers a way out of the egoistic and self-centred futilities which constitute man's own efforts to complete his life.

#### The Biblical Doctrine of Grace

Pauline thought contains the fully rounded Christian doctrine of grace, including both the conquest of sin in the heart of man and the merciful power of God over the sin which is never entirely overcome in any human heart. The Christian experience thus includes both a good conscience and, at the same time, a sense of sin. Underlying both is the awareness of divine forgiveness and the sense of righteousness

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 98-99.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 99.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid.







imparted by divine grace. Niebuhr interprets Paul's teaching, in summary, to mean: "You are now sinless. Therefore you must not sin any more . . . Self-love has been destroyed in principle in your life. See to it now that the new principle of devotion to God in Christ is actualized in your life."<sup>1</sup>

The difference seems to be between those whose lives are governed by the principle of self-centredness and those governed by the principle of devotion and obedience to God. But to have broken with sin in principle does not rule out the possibility of further sinning. In a well-known passage, Paul disavows perfection, regarding newness of life as a gift gradually to be appropriated. "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, while insisting upon the great difference between the old and new life, Paul never lapses into perfectionism. His primary emphasis is the concept of grace as "justification," the assurance of divine forgiveness. Man does not find peace in his own righteousness but in the assurance of divine forgiveness and in his faith. The Christian's righteousness is "imputed" to him by the Christ to whom he has become obedient in principle.

Moralists find the idea of the "imputation of righteousness" offensive because of its non-moral character. Forgiveness, however, is a form of love which goes beyond good and evil. This is bound to be offensive to pure moralists.

The Pauline doctrine really contains the whole Christian conception of God's relation to human history. It recognizes the sinful corruption of human life on every level of goodness. It knows that the pride of sin is greatest when men claim to have conquered sin completely. ('Not of works lest any man should boast.') It proclaims no sentimentalized version of the divine mercy. It is possible to appropriate this mercy only through the Christ, whose sufferings disclose the wrath of God against sin, and whose perfection as man is accepted as normative for the believer, by the same faith which sees in Him, particularly His

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.102. cf., inter alia, Rom.6:11-12; Eph. 4:17-32; Eph. 5:8; Gal. 5:24-26.

<sup>2</sup> Phil. 3:12, A. V.



Cross, the revelation of the mystery of the divine mercy triumphing over, without annulling, the divine wrath.<sup>1</sup>

This is "justification by faith," a faith through which the grace of God is apprehended in two ways: as power within the life of a man, making for newness of life, and as the power of God's love over man, cancelling man's sin by his mercy. As opposed to medieval Catholic ideas of sanctification, the balanced Pauline doctrine recognizes that forgiveness is as necessary at the end as at the beginning of the Christian life.

In speaking of the "law," St. Paul doubtless had the Jewish law in mind. His larger reference, though, is to legalism as such and to the legalistic approach wherever found. By New Testament standards the demands of the law are not high enough and there are no resources provided to fulfill even these limited demands. The law does not extend man to fulfill his possibilities for good. "These possibilities are comprehended only in the law of love, which transcends and fulfills all law."<sup>2</sup> The worst feature of legalism, though, is the false sense of righteousness it evokes in those who keep its letter.

### Regeneration in Christ

The Biblical doctrine of grace does not commend itself to modern thought, Christian or non-Christian. "All modern theories of human nature," says Niebuhr, ". . . have arrived at simpler solutions for the moral problem."<sup>3</sup> These modern solutions generally are characterized by a common approach: the enhancement of mind and reason over bodily impulse. So convinced are moderns that the solution lies in the simple application of intelligence, that the problem of the advocate of the Biblical doctrine is to establish its relevance. Niebuhr undertakes to do this by the application to human experience of a Pauline text which is taken as a comprehensive and representative expression of Biblical doctrine and Christian experience. "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; Yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me, and gave himself for me."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Human Destiny, p. 104.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 107.    <sup>4</sup>Gal. 2:20, A. V.







### "I am crucified with Christ"

In the symbolism of the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul interprets the destruction of the old life and the birth of the new. The old, sinful self must be "crucified," shattered and destroyed. This is something quite other than a process of redemption by extension of dominion of mind over body. The Christian doctrine of grace is meaningful only if the Christian doctrine of original sin is true to human experience.

The self in the state of sin cannot be saved by mere enlightenment. It must be broken, shattered and "crucified." As long as it remains self-centred, any extension of perspective merely serves as a larger opportunity to bring more lives and interests under its dominion. The necessity of this drastic experience gives validity to the strategy of the evangelical sects, with their emphasis upon the crisis of conversion. Whenever the self is confronted by the power and holiness of God, and is genuinely conscious of the real source and center of life, it is shattered. In Christian faith Christ mediates the confrontation of the self by God. In him, man's vague sense of the divine is focused into a revelation of divine mercy and judgment. In this revelation fear of judgment and hope of mercy are so commingled that despair leads to repentance and repentance hope.

### "Nevertheless I live"

With the breaking of the vicious circle of self-centredness, the new self emerges, living in and for others and in the love of God. "The new self is the real self; for the self is infinitely self-transcendent; and any premature centring of itself around its own interests, individually or collectively, destroys and corrupts its freedom."<sup>1</sup> The key to understanding man's plight and his salvation lies in the understanding that man's failure is one of impotence rather than lack of knowledge. Theories of salvation by knowledge are based upon a dualistic view of human personality, separating mind from body and spirit from nature. They fail to appreciate the unity of the self in its vital and rational processes, devitalizing "spirit" and despiritualizing physical life.

If the self is not possessed by the "Holy Spirit," it is in constant

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<sup>1</sup>Human Destiny, p. 110.



danger of invasion by a lesser spirit or power which will destroy it. The possession of the self by a spirit less than the "Holy Spirit" is exemplified in such demonic possessions as religious nationalism, with the virtual deification of the state and the demand for unconditioned devotion. The demonic makes pretensions of divinity, and produces a spurious sense of transfiguration as the little narrow self is caught up in the larger collective self of race or nation. But the real self reaches beyond man's earthbound entities to the eternal. Therefore such demonic possession only smothers and destroys the real self, reducing it to the dimensions of nature.

Speaking of the political religions which have dominated so much of mankind in recent decades, Niebuhr cites their ascendancy as indicative of how much more human life is subject to the rule of power than to the rule of mind. Possession of the self by anything less than the "Holy Spirit," however is destructive. Possession by the "Holy Spirit" is in contrast to some lesser possession. In the latter case spirit represents some partial aspect of life which does not deserve unconditioned devotion. Christian faith regards Christ as the criterion of the holiness of spirit. This is so because he is an historical focus of the divine, making the divine morally and socially relevant to finite human nature. God's unique revelation in Christ also makes the divine known in history without investing any particularity of vitality of history with sanctity or triumph it does not deserve. "Christ is thus both the criterion of the holiness of spirit and the symbol of the relevance between the divine and the human."<sup>1</sup> Thus Paul's "nevertheless I live" stands in opposition to the demonic possession of self by any human or historical particularity.

Niebuhr sees Paul's statement as a refutation also of mystical doctrines in which salvation is destruction of the self through absorption in the universal. This is so because of the "existential" nature of the self as conceived in Christian faith.

The self is a unity of finiteness and freedom, of involvement in natural process and transcendence over process. There is, therefore, not one particular level of the self, either in its consciousness

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 112.







or its reason, which can be extricated from flux and thereby achieve redemption. But on the other hand the unity of the self is so conceived in the Christian faith that it is not destroyed in the process of its fulfillment.<sup>1</sup>

"Yet not I, but Christ liveth in me"

The experience of conversion is a process of reconstruction. It is not the destruction of the self, but a transformation, expressed in the words "Christ liveth in me." This new life is not attained through man's own power, nor is the new self ever an accomplished reality. It is the Christ of intention who lives in the reconstituted self. "Its dominant purpose and intention are set in the direction of Christ as the norm. . . . By grace . . . the divine mercy 'imputes' the perfection of Christ and accepts the self's intentions for achievements."<sup>2</sup> Here the two aspects of "grace" are involved: (1) as the power not our own and (2) as the forgiveness of our sins.

#### Grace as Power Not Our Own

The power of sinful self-love is so great that release from this bondage is recognized as the work of a power from beyond the self. Yet, if divine grace alone provides the power for the new life, Christian faith must accept a doctrine of divine determinism, with a consequently weakened sense of personal responsibility. This led to predestination, from Calvin to Barth. It also led to moral irresponsibility. Historically some Christian groups achieved a sense of responsibility which their predestination doctrines denied.

Paul's statement of the paradoxical relation of grace and free will, is contained in Phil. 2:12-13, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Paradoxical as this statement is, it does justice to the complexities involved in more than either purely deterministic or purely moralistic interpretations of conversion.

The Catholic effort to do justice to both grace and free will seems fairer here than the Augustinian-Reformation tendency to deny all human activity and responsibility where repentance and faith are

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 113.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 114.



concerned. Thomas Aquinas used the metaphor of the light of the sun and the seeing of the eye, thus stressing human responsibility for turning to the light. This tends to define the human and divine "roles" too precisely and to place them on the same level, thereby obscuring the profundity of the experience of conversion. "The real situation is that both affirmations - that only God in Christ can break and reconstruct the sinful self, and that the self must 'open the door' and is capable of doing so - are equally true; and they are both unqualifiedly true, each on its own level. Yet either affirmation becomes false if it is made without reference to the other."<sup>1</sup>

While the Catholic conception of the relation of grace and human resources seeks to do justice to both elements, it leaves the way open for human self-righteousness in a way that aroused the reaction of Reformation theology in the direction of total emphasis upon the divine grace. The danger in the Protestant emphasis, of course, is that it tends to underestimate human freedom, thus oversimplifying that which is very complex.

#### Grace as the Forgiveness of Sins

The second connotation of this Pauline text, in Niebuhr's view, is the suggestion that the new life is not an accomplished reality. Christ is its norm "by faith," and divine grace is accepted which imputes his perfection to the believer. This meaning is supported by the words with which the passage continues: "And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

Here is one of Niebuhr's key arguments: validation by experience. The validation, however, should not be looked for in some natural experience. The validation must come partly as a contradiction to human wisdom; for men, in their human wisdom, are never conscious of the seriousness of sin. It is from the "wisdom of God," apprehended by faith, that men become aware of their need of forgiveness. This comes in a consummatory experience which somehow bridges the gap between imperfection and transcendent goodness.

Without a radical sense of being judged from without, man always

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 118.







manages to find some self-justification. If man judges himself, the very self judgment implies the goodness of the self which is making the judgment upon the empirical self. Yet this assumption of goodness runs counter to the Biblical faith, which says, "I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified; but he that judgeth me is the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

Such an experience is itself the fruit of grace in the sense that it represents a 'wisdom' about life which is 'foolishness' in prospect and wisdom only in retrospect. Experience as such may not yield it, and yet justify it in the end.<sup>2</sup>

Is it true that sin, though broken in principle, is never broken in fact; that peace, though anticipated, is never fully realized; and that final peace is dependent upon divine resources? It is not surprising that such a doctrine provokes indifference, if not hostility from modern man. The real question is not our ability to achieve perfection. Even the perfectionist sects admit that life is in process.

The question is whether in the development of the new life some contradiction between human self-will and the divine purpose remains. The issue is whether the basic character of human history, as it is apprehended in the Christian faith, is overcome in the lives of those who have thus apprehended it.<sup>3</sup>

The logical answer is that man, become aware of his self-love, will rise above it. This is partially true. Repentance does lead to a new life. But experience is that man does not rise above his self-love. Niebuhr strongly contends that the historical record of the Christian Church refutes all claims of perfection or superiority. "The sad experiences of Christian history show how human pride and spiritual arrogance rise to new heights precisely at the point where the claims of sanctity are made without due qualification."<sup>4</sup>

Time and again it is the "publicans and sinners" who have stood out in witness against the Christian saints to rescue human situations from fanaticism. Niebuhr contends that holiness, claimed as a simple possession, becomes corrupted. The difficulty, however, is that the publicans and sinners are prone to the same corruption. Even while witnessing against the arrogance of the church, they develop their

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<sup>1</sup> I Cor. 4:4.    <sup>2</sup> Human Destiny, p. 121.    <sup>3</sup> Ibid.    <sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 122.



own fanaticisms. It is at this point that they are in a less advantageous position than the Christian. While the sceptic may see clearly how all goodness and truth can serve as a cloak for self interest, he has no positive alternative to offer and lapses into moral nihilism. From this the Christian is rescued because, by faith alone he clings to truth and goodness, despite logic and despite the seeming "evidence" of history.

This pull from beyond the self and counter-pull of selfishness is not resolved by mere expressions of brotherhood that are in reality manifestations of selfishness, leading back into the same deceptions and self deceptions, as the individual identifies his interests with more inclusive or ultimate interests. Yet the Christian man feels both pulls upon him.

It is not easy to express both these two aspects of the life of grace, to which all history attests without seeming to offend the canons of logic. That is one reason why moralists have always found it rather easy to discount the doctrine of 'justification by faith.' But here, as in many cases, a seeming defiance of logic is merely a consequence of an effort to express complex facts of experience that in one sense the converted man is righteous and that in another sense he is not.<sup>1</sup>

The complexity of this problem not only makes it difficult to express it properly, but also to do justice to either half of the question without doing injustice to the other aspect. To acknowledge that the saints nevertheless remain sinners may obscure man's indeterminate possibilities for good, and vice versa. The course of this debate embraces the history of western Christendom and involves the issues crucial to any understanding or possible reorientation of modern spiritual life. The first important step, though, is to emphasize that the two aspects of the experience of grace are mutually supportive and not contradictory.

To understand that the Christ in us is not a possession but a hope, that perfection is not a reality but an intention; that such peace as we know in this life is never purely the peace of achievement but the serenity of being 'completely known and all forgiven;' all this does not destroy moral ardor and responsibility. On the contrary it is the only way

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 124-125.





of preventing premature completions of life, or arresting the new and more terrible pride which may find its roots in the soil of humility, and of saving the Christian life from the intolerable pretension of saints who have forgotten that they are sinners.<sup>1</sup>

### Pride, Grace and Educational Policy

#### Pride Corrupts the Church

In many different ways Niebuhr returns to an emphasis not calculated to make church people comfortable or smug. He reiterates the point that the last stronghold of sinful pride, the citadel where, most firmly entrenched, pride can, and very often does, make its most determined stand and most arrogantly plausible claims, is within the church itself.

This is a consideration pertinent to the study of moral development as an educational aim. Human pride and arrogance being what they are, what humanly manipulated institution can be entrusted with the authoritarian indoctrination of religion, especially where the audience is both captive and relatively defenceless? Such an idea, of course, runs counter both to the principle of free-ranging enquiry as the way of education and to its counterpart that the gospel comes to human hearts not through regimentation or coercion but in an unforced manner, like the wind that "bloweth where it listeth."

Niebuhr's treatment of "The Conflict Between Grace and Pride" in Human Destiny<sup>2</sup> discusses this problem in the life of the church. Niebuhr holds that the Pauline formulation of the gospel, just reviewed in previous sections, is the characteristic Protestant and Reformation position, and that it is the maturely developed Biblical position.

In Christian history it is apparent that human pride resists the truth of the gospel almost as vigorously within the church as outside of it. Men want a Christ, but not the Christ Jesus of Nazareth turned out to be, vindicating the justice and mercy of God, without including any man in the vindication. While this denial took many forms, the important point is to recognize the underlying motive, which is essentially the same. "It is the unwillingness of man to admit the curious

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 125-126.    <sup>2</sup> chap. v.





predicament of his existence by reason of his simultaneous involvement in, and transcendence over, temporal flux and finiteness; or, more exactly his unwillingness to admit that there is no escape from this predicament even on the level of the new life."<sup>1</sup> The recurring method of seeking escape from or denial of the contradiction between the human and divine is to interpret Christ as a disclosure in history of the eternal by means of which the believer is translated from the temporal to the eternal, apprehending eternal truth in the process, i.e. achieving perfection.

This perennial revolt within Christian history has resulted in fanaticism and imperialism, in the invariable pattern of setting one part of Christian truth against the whole.

This revolt explains why a civilization, informed by a religious faith, which, alone among the faiths of the world, both encouraged historic creativity and responsibility and yet set the limits upon man's historic possibilities, must appear from the perspective of the more earthbound (Confucianism) and the more world-denying (Buddhism) religions of the East as a civilization of unbridled ambitions and heaven-storming passions.<sup>2</sup>

That Christian history has worked out this way is no accident of theological tendency or historical occasion. A religion which apprehends the truth about God and man by faith alone inevitably becomes an instrument of human arrogance. Whenever the truth held by faith is regarded as a secure possession, arrogance results. Instead of mediating judgment to man it becomes a vehicle of perfectionist pretension, with consequent aggressions and imperialisms. "The New Testament understands how inevitable this misuse of the gospel is. Its conception of the false Christs and of the Antichrist, who appear at the end of history expresses this understanding. But this tragic aspect of Christian history is understood only occasionally outside of the New Testament."<sup>3</sup>

It may be commented that, while historically Christians have sought to defend themselves by pointing to the church's virtues, actually an understanding and admission of the possible perversions of Christianity is the best witness to the gospel. Where "religion in the schools" is concerned, it becomes all the more evident that even the Christian

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<sup>1</sup> Human Destiny, p. 128.    <sup>2</sup> Ibid.    <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 129.





Church cannot be trusted to teach its own gospel in an authoritarian situation. That which is taught in an authoritarian context ceases to be the gospel and becomes something else. The gospel is a tender plant which will not flourish save in the atmosphere of unforced freedom. One need only look at countries where "religion in the schools" is established, to see the futility of evangelization by legislation. In Christianity and Crisis, Niebuhr comments upon this:

But we should engage in comparative studies of the democracies of Western Europe. They are less pluralistic than we are, and they boast not only of school prayers, but of compulsory religious education. Yet our religious communities, whatever their defects, are obviously more vital than most European Churches. This may indicate that non-coercive religious instruction in home and church preserves the religious substance of our culture more effectively than semi-compulsory public instruction.<sup>1</sup>

#### The Catholic Conception of Grace

##### "God In Us"

Niebuhr contends that Catholic theory, following Augustine, departs from the essentially Biblical emphasis that grace is pardon more than it is power. That grace is pardon is the Biblical answer to the problem of sin. The Roman Catholic interpretation of grace as power leads eventually to the position that whatever is done within the sacramental framework of that Church will be inspired and empowered by the grace which flows through ecclesiastical channels. Conversely, what is not so mediated, lacking grace, will lack power, and prove ineffectual in the face of the moral problems of life.

Augustine's emphasis upon grace as power leads to a fundamental error in the later Catholic conception of the Christian life. It is the subordination of justification to sanctification. In place of the experience of forgiveness, emphasis is upon a sense of rightness which soon becomes self-righteousness. Man believes that the sinful contradiction between himself and God is eliminated, allowing the soul to grow in grace through ever-higher stages of sanctification. This becomes a

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Prayer and Justice in School and Nation," Christianity and Crisis, Vol. XXIV, No. 9, May 25, 1964, pp. 93-96.





definitive Catholic conception. It contains, unfortunately, the seeds of its own self-righteousness and human pretension. Instead of man achieving perfection "on his own" (the Hellenistic idea), now he and God accomplish it together. The resultant self-righteousness is even more overweening.

Niebuhr thinks Augustine is quite right in recognizing the need of a power not our own to come to the aid of our own power. This is a safeguard against simple Pelagian moralism. His criticism of Augustine, though, is that the latter does not recognize that human self-love continues to express itself even in the new life and through the new life. Augustine anticipates that, even if the goal of perfection may be unattainable, man may run perfectly in his race towards that goal.<sup>1</sup>

Augustine does not affirm the sinlessness of Christians. He does, however, hold that the sins that remain are "venial" rather than "mortal." These, though, are not basic, and are atoned for by almsgiving, and gotten rid of through confession and absolution, including the final forgiveness at man's last hour. This distinction between venial and mortal sins is important in Catholic thought. The cleansing thus of venial sins is the thin edge of the wedge of "righteousness by works."<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr is particularly concerned to point out the fundamental relevance of this two-sided doctrine of grace to man's moral life: grace as forgiveness and grace as power. He reaffirms the necessity of guarding against over-emphasis of the latter at the expense of the former. Here, where self-righteousness achieves new pinnacles, actually finding additional room for pride in the thought that one's righteousness draws its power from God, the moral danger is seen in situations where men have control or influence over the lives of others. The Catholic position across the ages, based upon Augustine, has been that, in the recipient of the divine grace the breaking of the power of sin "in principle" means the destruction of self-love in fact. What sins remain are vagrant and "venial." Reformation theology, on the other hand, stresses that divine forgiveness does not make man

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<sup>1</sup> Human Destiny, p. 136.    <sup>2</sup> Ibid.





righteous in himself, but rather covers him with the garment of Christ's righteousness even though he is still quite capable of sin.<sup>1</sup>

The doctrine of grace maintained throughout its history by the Roman Catholic Church is Augustine's doctrine. Grace is "the completion of an imperfect nature,"<sup>2</sup> rather than the free forgiveness of God. Through grace man is able to do good. Man's redemption is not only "in principle" but in literal fact and specific practice. Forgiveness is for past sins rather than for any present or continuing disposition.

The final and symbolically most revealing form of this new Catholic self-righteousness is the belief held in Catholic faith that in the final judgment man is saved by merit; only he must realize that the merit is achieved by the grace of God. On this point Aquinas was able to agree perfectly with Augustine.<sup>3</sup>

Niebuhr sees the ultimate question as whether man can ever, through any achievement of his own reason or merit of grace, have an easy conscience before God. To believe this is to believe that an individually-based will can be brought into conformity with the will and power of God. Catholic doctrine is that this is possible, especially as that doctrine is made the basis for the "perfectibility by grace" of the Catholic mystics. The Catholic synthesis was a balance between

. . . the Biblical idea that man cannot complete his own life and history, and that he involves himself in evil in the pretense of doing so; and the classical (and generally non-Biblical) confidence that some capacity in man, which transcends finiteness and process, is able to realize the vision. . .<sup>4</sup>

From Bernard of Clairvaux, through the Council of Trent, to Cardinal Newman and the present day, the position is consistently held that, through the grace of God, the soul of man is actually made righteous. This doctrine though, in Niebuhr's view, oversteps the limits of what is possible for man.

The historical consequences of the literalistic application of the

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 136-137.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 40.    <sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 141-142.



Catholic conception of grace are well known. The medieval system broke down in the complex social upheavals and realignments of thought known as Reformation and Renaissance. While, from one viewpoint, papal political efforts were an attempt to bring unruly kings and nations under "the law of Christ," they were also endeavors to achieve political power. While the better motive was a sincere desire to make the reign of God effective in the world through His Church, the fallible men who led the Church inevitably succumbed to less worthy motives.

It was on the one hand an effort to bring all the truth of science, philosophy and culture under the authority of the truth of the gospel, in which partial truth finds its fulfillment and the sinful corruptions of truth are revealed and purged. It was on the other hand the expression of the pride of priests, seeking to transmute an ultimate religious position, which can be held only by faith, into a human possession and into an instrument of authority over other types of knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

That a close union of church and state invites corruption of the relationship, with the insinuation of human pride in such a manner that the end result is the domination and exploitation of one by the other seems almost an historical inevitability. This Niebuhr calls the "pathos of the glory and the decline of medieval Christianity,"<sup>2</sup> involving the Church in new sin on the very pinnacle of its spiritual achievement.

### The Reformation Conception of Grace

#### "God Over Us"

While the "Reformation" means many things, its aspect most pertinent to this study is its conception of grace, given centrality in the Reformation movement by Martin Luther. Here, in Niebuhr's view, the old prophetic thesis was reaffirmed: that the judgment of God stands over against all human accomplishments and pretensions, political or ecclesiastical. Indeed, it may be observed that here is one of the "lessons of history." The Reformation doctrine of "justification by faith" is the recognition of a lesson learned in history the hard way. The truth was present in the gospel message to begin with, but was obscured by

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 146-147.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 148.





men who were led astray by their own anxious pretensions.

At this point the reader may have discerned that three different attitudes towards education take their inspiration from the three conceptions of grace now under consideration. The Roman Catholic position has been indicated. The Renaissance will be dealt with subsequently. Now it is important to establish the connection of modern Protestantism, through the Reformation, with the Pauline doctrine of grace and the earlier emphasis of the Old Testament prophets. If Niebuhr is right in his argument that this connection exists, the fact of such continuity is the principal aspect of Reformation thought with which this dissertation is concerned. Niebuhr virtually describes the Reformation in terms of this one doctrine.

This doctrine, which appears so irrelevant to modern men, who are strangers to both the Catholic and the Reformation interpretations of the Christian faith, represents the final renunciation in the heart of Christianity of the human effort to complete life and history, whether with or without divine grace. It represents the culmination of the prophetic interpretation of history; for it admits those aspects of historic reality without reservation which the prophets first disclosed. It understands that human history is permanently suspended between the flux of nature and finiteness and its eternal source and end; that every effort to escape this situation involves man in the sinful pride of seeking to obscure the conditioned character of his existence; and that even the knowledge of this fact, which man may have 'by grace' is no guarantee of immunity from sin.

The Reformation understands that therefore we are 'justified by faith' and 'saved in hope'; that we must look forward to a completion of life which is not in our power and even beyond our comprehension. It realizes that the unity of human existence, despite its involvement in, and freedom from, natural process, is such that it cannot be 'saved' either by disavowing its freedom in order to return to nature, or by sloughing off its creaturely character so that it may rise to the 'eternal.' This is a final enigma of human existence for which there is no answer except by faith and hope; for all answers transcend the categories of human reason. Yet without these answers human life is threatened with scepticism and nihilism on the one hand; and with fanaticism





and pride on the other. For either it is overwhelmed by the relativity and partiality of all human perspectives and comes to the conclusion that there is no truth, since no man can expound the truth without corrupting it; or it pretends to have absolute truth despite the finite nature of human perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

The Reformation had many defects. There were many mistakes and inconsistencies. Its critics have filled in the gaps with their own misconceptions. None of these should be allowed to obscure understanding of that which, from the standpoint of Protestantism, is perhaps the central issue. Certainly from the standpoint of this dissertation, the Protestant understanding of the doctrine of grace is the significant feature of the Reformation.

### The Renaissance Departure from Grace

#### "Man for Himself"

Niebuhr regards the Renaissance and Reformation as partly contradictory forces emerging from the disintegration of the medieval synthesis. In Renaissance eyes, the Catholic view of life was too pessimistic, while from the standpoint of the Reformation the Catholic position was too optimistic. Catholic optimism, however, gives Catholicism more common ground with the Renaissance than the Reformation has with either. Renaissance perfectionism differs from that of Catholicism only in that it dispenses with the necessity of "grace" as a prerequisite. Human life has its own capacity for fulfillment. This is in contrast to the Reformation, which interprets grace not primarily as God's power at work in man but as God's forgiveness towards man. Niebuhr maintains that Protestantism denies the possibilities of individual or corporate perfection implied in Catholic theories of grace.

The Renaissance opposes the ecclesiastical control of all cultural life in the name of the autonomy of human reason and thereby lays the foundation for the whole modern cultural development. The Reformation opposes the dogmatic control of religious thought by the church in the name of the authority of Scripture, insisting that no human authority (not even that of the church) can claim the right of possessing and interpreting the truth of the gospel, which stands beyond all human wisdom and which is invariably

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 148-149.



corrupted (at least in detail) by these interpretations. Each one of these protests against the church's pretended sole right or ability to interpret and to apply the final truth has its own validity. But they are drawn from completely different levels of experience.<sup>1</sup>

The Renaissance solution recognizes the partiality and finiteness of human perspectives, but still expects to overcome this progressively through the extension of human knowledge and understanding. In this it overlooks how inevitably man's peculiar, paradoxical combination of finiteness and freedom leads him into sin.

The Renaissance as a spiritual movement is best understood as a tremendous affirmation of the limitless possibilities of human existence, and as a rediscovery of the sense of a meaningful history. This affirmation takes many forms, not all of which are equally consistent with the fundamental impulse of the movement. But there is enough consistency in the movement as a whole to justify the historian in placing in one historical category such diverse philosophical, religious and social movements as the early Italian Renaissance, Cartesian rationalism and the French enlightenment; as the liberal idea of progress and Marxist catastrophism; as sectarian perfectionism and secular utopianism. In all of these multifarious expressions there is a unifying principle. It is the impulse towards the fulfillment of life in history. The idea that life can be fulfilled without those reservations and qualifications which Biblical and Reformation thought make is derived from two different sources: from the classical confidence in human capacities and from the Biblical-Christian impulse towards sanctification and the fulfillment of life, more particularly the Biblical-eschatological hope of the fulfillment of history itself.<sup>2</sup>

While consciously following classical thinking, the Renaissance, nevertheless, unconsciously adopted a Biblical-Christian element as the basis for its optimism. The view of history as a meaningful process, moving towards the realization of higher and yet higher possibilities is a transposition and transmutation of Biblical eschatology.

The transformation is twofold. There is no "end" beyond history

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.151.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.160. For a comprehensive definition of "Renaissance," see Human Destiny, pp.157-169.





and no "judgment."

It had, in other words, no consciousness of the ambiguous and tragic elements in history; or at least it knew of none which would not be progressively eliminated by the historical process itself. The whole of modern utopianism is thus implicit in Renaissance spirituality. The 'idea of progress,' the most characteristic and firmly held article in the credo of modern man, is the inevitable philosophy of history emerging from the Renaissance. The result was achieved by combining the classical confidence in man with the Biblical confidence in the meaningfulness of history. It must be observed, however, that history is given a simpler meaning than that envisaged in the prophetic-Biblical view.<sup>1</sup>

### The Legacy of Conflict

While the Renaissance was concerned primarily with intellectual and social liberty, the Reformation sought the more inward freedom of the right of the individual soul to the grace of God by faith without the interposition of any institutional intermediary. Because the Roman Catholic Church claimed ultimate authority both in the dispensing of "grace" and in the control of social-historical situations, the Reformation and Renaissance did find themselves allies in the common cause of liberty. Their community of interest, though, was rather in what they were both against. The underlying differences were profound. Their contrast may be seen in terms of the "sanctification" and "justification" aspects of the Christian doctrine of grace.

In terms of Christian doctrine, the Renaissance is "sanctification-ist" in principle. It brushes aside completely any reservations upon the hope of fulfilling life and realizing its highest possibilities. Where the Catholic doctrine subordinates the concept of "justification," the dependence upon divine mercy, the Renaissance dismisses the idea completely as irrelevant. "One might add that on this issue the Renaissance has been definitive for the spirituality of modern man. For no typically modern man has any appreciation of the truth about life and history contained in the doctrine."<sup>2</sup> The Renaissance, however, goes even further, dismissing the whole doctrine of "grace," with its paradox of "justification" and "sanctification", regarding the latter as

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 154-155.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 153.





meaningless and unnecessary as the former. Renaissance thinking recognizes no hiatus between knowledge of good and power to accomplish it. This is a direct return to the classical conception of man as having the capacity within himself (either rational or mystical) adequate for all life's goals. Only sectarian Protestantism retains the concept of "grace" in modern life, and these in terms of "sanctification," or perfectionism, which they regard as dependent upon divine providence for either personal or social realization.

### The Triumph of the Renaissance

The modern period of advance and expansion facilitated the complete triumph of Renaissance over Reformation thought. Human achievement in recent generations has obscured the truth that man's problems go with him and reappear on every level of attainment.

An assumption of the bourgeois capitalistic-democratic revolution has been that, with the overthrow of medievalism, injustice would disappear. Similarly, nineteenth and twentieth-century utopians have imagined that, with the overthrow of bourgeois capitalism, perfect justice would ensue. This, thinks Niebuhr, is like the optimism of a youth who imagines that once he attains full physical growth the successful realization of his life is guaranteed. He does not realize that each age and condition of life creates its own problems. Modern technology's sudden increase of man's opportunities for social cohesion and wider community have given new impulse to the assumption of the imminent realization of well-being. "It was not recognized that the same technology which would create a potential world community might also produce international chaos, if the world community lacked adequate political instruments for the organization of its life."<sup>1</sup>

In this generation it is realized that the utopian dreams of the earlier centuries of the modern era were illusory, leaving modern culture in a state of pathetic confusion. Renaissance thinking did such a thorough job of demolishing the Reformation that modern culture is now left with no alternatives to which to turn when its assumed certainties are dissipated.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 182.



No alternative perspectives are available because the triumph of the Renaissance was so complete that it destroyed not only particular interpretations of the Christian religion, but submerged the Christian religion itself, as, in any sense, a potent force in modern culture. The Catholic form of the religion became discredited by the fact that all the liberties of modern life and all the achievements of social and political justice were established in defiance of Catholicism's premature identification of its feudal society with the sanctities of the Kingdom of God. The Reformation form of the religion was not so much discredited as simply lost. It lives on, of course, after a fashion; for nothing in history ever seems to die completely. It certainly does not live with any such vestigial vitality as Catholicism boasts.<sup>1</sup>

The present need is to bring to light again what was true in the Reformation and to point out what was false in the Renaissance. Neither was all true or all false. Contemporary events have so refuted Renaissance illusions that this very process may be the occasion for rediscovery of the truth of the Reformation. The Reformation must, nevertheless, be approached critically, and not in such a manner as to turn contemporary disillusionment into historical defeatism. This would be equally as senseless and extreme as the illusions in recent decades of the utopians. Having learned nothing from history, we would be merely following the vicissitudes of history through "alternate moods of illegitimate hope and unjustified despair."<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr thus looks for both positive and negative features in Renaissance and Reformation theories, finally examining the possibilities of a positive synthesis.<sup>3</sup> His position is that both Renaissance and Reformation embody insights which must enter into any reformulation of human possibilities and limitations. This calls for a re-opening of the Renaissance-Reformation debate which came to a premature conclusion with the complete triumph of the former. Even large sections of modern Protestantism are more influenced by the Renaissance than the Reformation.<sup>4</sup>

To reopen this debate does not imply the rightness or the wrongness

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 182-183.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., chap. vi.    <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 157.





of either movement, only that the Renaissance was not as right and the Reformation was not as wrong as the one-sided outcome of the struggle might seem to imply. Niebuhr thinks that the revolt against modern culture, called "dialectical theology" and led by men such as Karl Barth represents the radical swing to the Reformation position, assuming it to be wholly right and the Renaissance to be wholly wrong. By defying what is true in the Renaissance, this movement loses its opportunity to gain a hearing in pointing out the flaws in the Renaissance. "It seems necessary, therefore, to reopen the debate between Renaissance and Reformation by a different strategy, and to appreciate what was Christian and true in the Renaissance interpretation of life and history before we convict it of its errors."<sup>1</sup>

### Emerging Conclusions

"Regeneration in Christ" is set forth as the norm of man's fulfillment because it is regarded as necessary, due to man's incompleteness. That there are many other possible patterns of moral development, each in terms of its own norms, is agreed. The proposition that all men need regeneration in Christ is, nevertheless, an implicit criticism of other approaches to man's moral problems. It is not to deny that there is good in other philosophies or systems, but rather to question their adequacy. The argument would be that, in the Christian way, as expounded by Paul, man achieves a richer and more complete fulfillment than in alternate ways, because the Christian way fits his nature and his needs. The gospel speaks to the human situation.

That the "Christian experience" would more probably come to pass within the fellowship and under the ministrations of a Christian church would seem about as reasonable as to expect that more students will pass Grade XII through attending high school than through home study. It is not claimed that the church has any monopoly upon the processes inducing Christian experience in individuals. Left alone with the New Testament, or through the influence of other individuals, some persons might come to it themselves. Unless the church is utterly corrupt or ineffectual, however, one might expect a higher incidence of conversions

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 159.





to Christ within than without the fellowship. Is not this so much the case that some church might be said to be virtually indispensable to the process if it is to take place in more than isolated instances?

If claims for the necessity or desirability of the Christian experience be accepted, a paradoxical situation emerges, in which the school, whose every educational move has implications of moral development, needs the help of the church to do what it cannot do itself, and yet is asked to do by so many. Meanwhile the church, whose main concern is with the spiritual factors relating to moral development, is unable to speak directly to the school.

This situation might be eased considerably if Protestant churches, for their part, would accept realistically what is desirable and possible in the way of "religion in the schools" and what is not. It would involve also recognition by educationalists, that the school does not and cannot deal with the whole man, and that while education is moral development, that which the school can provide is neither total nor adequate. School acceptance of this complementary role would depend upon the viewpoint of teachers, the philosophy of the educational system, and who controls the school.

This also leaves a large unchurched sector of the populace with only the school as a positive moral influence, apart from the home. Here, indeed, is the situation which is drawing the school further and further into the work of moral mentoring, personal guidance and counselling. Student failures and maladjustments are traced, in so many cases, to upset or disintegrating families, with whom the school must cope as best it can, or refer to secular social agencies who salvage what they can. Only those who do not work in this area can speak confidently of the school as the effectual agent in moral development.

Trying to solve this problem are three groups, each with an answer growing out of historical development, strenuous thought and sincere intentions. The three approaches are implicit in the three views of the Christian doctrine of grace discussed in this chapter. From each of these flows an educational policy, with its inevitable implications for moral development as an educational aim.

The Roman Catholic solution is well known, and is the logical out-working of belief in grace as "God in us." The secular solution is equally





clear, and gives effect to the aspirations of "Man for himself." Both of these proceed with the confidence that, given a chance, their system will work and "righteousness," however conceived, be attained. Both the man who believes that God is working through him, and the man who believes his own intelligence is the highest category, move confidently towards the Kingdom of God or Utopia, as the case may be.

Where population predominance permits it, the Roman Catholic solution is in effect, while, in other areas, for many reasons, the Renaissance has triumphed and the secular school is a fact. Because of the many extraneous factors, it would be most difficult to determine by research which solution is resulting in the "best" moral development. Perhaps the one thing that can be said is that, where these philosophies are concerned, "Never the twain shall meet."

In the middle stand the heirs of the Reformation, drawing their inspiration, they believe, from Paul's interpretation of divine grace as "God's mercy over us." With the Roman Catholics they feel the affinity of a common "fellowship in Christ," and with the secularists a common devotion to freedom. While desirous of sharing all the common ground possible with both Roman Catholic and secularist, those in the middle must stand their own ground, and fulfill the historic and appropriately designated function of Protestants. The protest, though, is not merely the negative objection that neither Catholic perfectionism nor secular utopianism really achieve what they profess, but rather is the positive witness that in regeneration through Christ, under the forgiving grace of God, is a way that is realistic, both in its view of man and its possibility of attainment.

The road ahead, if there be any such, for cooperation between secular school and Protestant church, surely must be found, as Niebuhr suggests, in a reopening of the dialogue of Renaissance and Reformation, with a new attempt at synthesis. This suggestion takes on meaning when applied to the everyday relationships of secular school and Protestant church. If the advisability of such cooperation be granted, it might be implemented through application of the principle that there is a difference between teaching about morals and conducting a class in such a way that the desired moral development is inherent in the lesson. Does not this same principle hold for the religious aspect of moral





development? Instead of arguing for the introduction of more formal "religious instruction in the schools," which would prove to be not only next to impossible to arrange, but also quite barren in its results, why not look rather to sympathetic teachers and an appreciative inclusion of Christian viewpoints, cultural material and general backgrounds in the curriculum at such appropriate points as objective scholarship and fair-minded concern would suggest? For their part, Protestant churches could facilitate this creative synthesis by being more alert to the thinking and problems of the modern world, more discriminating in sorting out the timeless message of the Bible from its matrix of ancient thought-forms, and more flexible in applying this continually relevant gospel to modern conditions. Such steps by the churches would make it much easier for secularists to recognize the possibilities and opportunities of synthesis.

Yet, even were all this to come to pass, with neither church nor school lies the first nor last word in the moral development of the child. Here both church and school - and child, must await the good pleasure of parents.





## CHAPTER VI

### THE CRITERION OF SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

#### Introduction

The danger of an educational system being led captive and used as the instrument of a people's enslavement, corruption and destruction is not imaginary. Such an outcome is not unknown to the present generation. Indeed, is not public education very commonly used as an instrument of national policy and invariably as an instrument of social policy? While secular education may foster democracy, it will inevitably follow that democracy wherever it may lead. Should the democracy deteriorate, or cease to be a democracy, its educational handmaiden, by virtue of its involvement, will say, perforce or willingly, like Ruth in the Old Testament story, "Whither thou goest I will go; and where thou lodgest I will lodge."<sup>1</sup>

While Niebuhr does not speak directly of educational policy, he is concerned with man's attachment to loyalties that will be above and beyond the state or social system in such a secure manner as to preclude the domination of mankind by any political organization, social class, pressure group or powerful clique. As has been noted, this maintenance of an overall loyalty was a function which the medieval Church, at its best, sought to fulfill, but in which it came to grief because of its own involvements with political power and social privilege.

The implication of Niebuhr's study appears to be that Protestant Christianity, operating from a position of independence, and free of political power or involvement, has the potential for providing the necessary check and counter-weight to political and social tyrannies, not as a rival political force or organization, but rather in its leavening of society with a view of life and a way of life that will immunize men to the blandishments of propaganda or the pressures of powerful

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<sup>1</sup>Ruth 1:16, A. V.



groups within the social order.

As the exploitation of educational systems for political or social ends is so common an occurrence and has such direct and pervasive influence upon the moral outlook of entire populations, an understanding of this process would appear essential to a fuller comprehension of the general problem of this dissertation. Niebuhr considers the social implications of competing theories important enough to require treatment in three chapters of Human Nature.<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr's approach at this point may be named "Christian Pragmatism." His discussion of conflicting theories is in terms of their social consequences. Whether they are "good" or "bad" depends upon their outcomes - their historically demonstrated outcomes. The difficulty of establishing historical "fact" is acknowledged. That this difficulty exists is no more a reason for abandoning the attempt to learn the lessons of history than that similar difficulties should lead to the abandonment of research in the physical sciences.

One of history's ambiguities, of course, is inherent in the material of the present chapter "The Criterion of Social Consequences." Do ideas have social consequences or are ideas themselves simply the outcomes of the social process? Do moral behaviors flow from philosophies or are they really only man's inevitable responses to his socio-economic environment for which the philosophies are rationalizations after the event? Niebuhr's discussion of environmental influence is included in this chapter in a section "The Social Basis of Conflicting Theories."

The question, then, is whether these competing philosophies are the causes of certain social outcomes or whether they are themselves the results of social conditions. Are the theories perhaps only symptoms? Are man's social codes and philosophies his manner of rationalizing his behavior, making his position more palatable, and justifying his way of life to himself and to others? Perhaps it is a chicken-and-egg relationship, in which causes produce effects which in themselves become causes in a circular manner, as out of social context grows moral code which in turn affects social context. This, of course, is Niebuhr's argument, that all man's codes and philosophies have an ideological

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<sup>1</sup>Op. cit., chaps. ii, iii and iv.





taint. The relationship between a dominant philosophy and social conditions appears to be interactive. As an example, one section of this present chapter is a discussion of "The Destruction of Individuality in Modern Culture." The more the individual is down-graded ideologically, the greater acceleration and reinforcement is given to the social process which is diminishing his stature and status. A morality that is a faithfully orthodox reflection of the currently dominant social situation strengthens that status quo and receives strength from it.

Once one recognizes the paradoxical relationship of philosophy to social process, how each grows out of the other, and each is both cause and effect, the way is clear to discuss either or both relationships. It is appropriate to examine the social origins of moral theory, and it is equally relevant to consider the social consequences of competing philosophies. It is, however, necessary to keep in mind that both aspects of the interactive process must enter into any balanced consideration.

This brings to attention in a new way Niebuhr's contention that the Biblical view of the human situation differs from other philosophies in that it does suggest a vantage point of transcendence that is "above" history and yet related to it. Niebuhr argues that the prophetic-Biblical view of man's nature and destiny, while it has its historical origins and context, is not just the outmoded rationalizations of a defunct primitive culture. It venerates no human system, ancient or modern, but is a critique of all societies and theories from a point of judgment above and beyond them all. This is so, even though its historical correlates are themselves subject to the same judgment as the tribalisms, ancient and modern which it transcends, judges and rebukes. Thus it is as a "Christian Pragmatist" that Niebuhr asks, in effect, "What are the social consequences of the various competing and conflicting theories as to the nature and destiny of man?" He rests his case upon an argument here summarized as, "The Criterion of Social Consequences."

#### Theories in Conflict

Niebuhr sees in modern life a conflict between two basic interpretations of life, broadly defined as rationalism and naturalism. His use of these terms is explained in his discussion of the meaning of the movements, which are examined next. He sees these two as the twin errors of modern thought. They become errors when they are abstracted from





the total context and exaggerated to the point of being made exclusive and normative viewpoints. Niebuhr contends that Christianity, rightly understood, comes to terms with both rationalism and naturalism in a larger synthesis, restoring them to their proper perspective. This is the argument of his chapter "The Problem of Vitality and Form in Human Nature."<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr discerns four terms in man's situation: (1) the vitality of nature, (2) the forms and unities of nature, (3) the freedom of man's spirit, within limits, to transcend the forms and direct the vitalities, (4) the forming capacity of man's spirit. Niebuhr believes that confusion arises because modern theories contradict one another as they seize on one element in the situation to interpret the whole. For the idealists, essential man is rational man. The romanticists regard natural vitalities and unities as normative, ignoring human freedom. Thus is modern culture confused and decadent.

Christianity, uncorrupted, has a principle of interpretation which transcends both form and vitality, as these are a unity in God. In Christianity man is interpreted as a unity of will in which human vitality, natural and spiritual, is set under the ordering will of God. Christianity opposes idealism, for human reason is itself involved in historical relativity. Claims of unconditioned validity for human reason are sinful. On the other hand, natural vitality is not regarded as evil in itself. Redemption is not enervation of or transcendence over natural impulse. Yet, when separated from Christianity, the romantic protest (natural impulse) degenerates into nihilistic defiance of form and order, and makes vitality self-justifying, or natural forms the principles of harmony.

The rationalistic approach, in Niebuhr's terms, is that which uses human intellectual ability, human "reason," as its principle of interpretation. It is this "reason" which operates upon the vitalities and forms of nature. In classical rationalism, as influenced by Plato, "soul" is the term used to describe the natural principle of order in the body. Plato, in the Phaedo, described the soul as opposing and coercing the very elements of which it is composed, as though talking to something not itself. But, says Niebuhr, if "soul" is the term used to express the

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<sup>1</sup> Human Nature, chap. ii.





unity of the body, "spirit" is the capacity to transcend both body and soul. Man is spirit as well as soul. Plato falsely attributes anarchy to bodily impulse. (This is the "rationalistic error" as Niebuhr sees it). Plato does not recognize the deeper source of anarchy: in impulses that have been given their freedom by man as spirit. In Platonic metaphysics divine reason coerces formless stuff. Platonic eros, though, represents natural vitalities sublimated rather than repressed by reason. This qualifies the purely negative Platonic concept of the relation of reason to nature. Kantian idealism, thinks Niebuhr, downgrades and rejects the impulses of nature more completely than any form of Greek classicism. Hegelian idealism derives the total dynamic of life, spiritual and natural, from reason. Logos is both logos and eros. Reason transmutes and tames all vitalities. This is a rationalized version and corruption of the Christian view of the unity of human life. Christian ideas of creation and providence are reduced to rationality. In place of the Christian concept of the unity of body and soul, all natural impulses are rationally derived. As this type of idealism is sometimes misconstrued to be the Christian viewpoint, Niebuhr is concerned to make it very clear that this idealism is not Christian.

There has been, says Niebuhr, a romantic protest against rationalism. The history of modern culture is that of an on-going debate between those who interpret man in terms of reason and those who see him in the context of nature. In modern times this has turned into a rebellion of romantics, materialists and the psychoanalytic school against rationalism, whether idealist or materialist. The romantic protest has been against the supposed enervation of natural vitalities through rational discipline. For Nietzsche vitality was self-justifying. He opposed Christianity with a doctrine of nihilism, and looked for the emergence of a new order in an aristocratic society based on the will to power. Marxism protests the dishonesty of reason in its pretensions of mastery over or creation of vital impulses. Man's conscious thoughts and actions are really only rationalizations of unconscious urges. While Freud develops this interpretation in relation to individualistic impulses, broadly categorized as sexual, Marx is concerned with underlying collectivistic drives. The error of romanticism, thinks Niebuhr, is to ascribe to the organic what is really a compound of nature and spirit. What is attributed





to nature is really an aspect of unique humanity. In elaborating this romantic error, Niebuhr gives a good statement of his own theory of human nature.

Nietzsche's will-to-power is a uniquely human characteristic, erroneously described as an impulse of nature. Rousseau saw the distinction, and recognized the will-to-power as the spiritual corruption of a simpler animal organism. The Freudian id and dreams simply do not fit into naturalistic categories, but betray the drive of something other than purely biological impulses. Freud fails to explain how simple biological impulses become such highly complex spiritual phenomena.

There are, says Niebuhr, many romantic elements in Marxism. The Marxist idea of sub-rational man involves social and materialistic concepts, but not biological. Out of the conflict of innumerable individual wills emerge unwilled results: an overruling superhuman logic, the dialectic of history. This is a sort of rationalized and mechanized version of the Christian concept of providence. The propulsive power of this dialectic is in the dynamics of historical economic relations, i.e. not just in hunger, but in the social organization designed to satisfy it. This, then, is not a simple vitality of nature but is formed out of superhuman historical logic and human consciousness of self. In Marxism rational consciousness is downgraded into the tool of unconscious forces. Conscious thought is regarded merely as evidence of a material bodily organ, the brain. Matter is not a product of mind, as with the idealists, but mind itself is a product of matter. Marxism is self-contradictory. Its social theory assumes voluntarism while its psychology is deterministic. In denying spiritual depth, Marxism precludes its own possibility of understanding evil. Its explanation of bourgeois greed is too simple. This greed is more than organized hunger. The possessive impulse is more spiritual than physical. Marxists do not understand the will to power, dishonesty or possessiveness. They interpret consciousness as merely the reflection and product of material conditions. Marxism has no answer to the "why" of human pretensions of general good. Claiming that rationalizations are unconscious, the Marxist then treats his foes' rationalizations with a moral scorn only conscious wrongdoing deserves.





### The Social Basis of Conflicting Theories<sup>1</sup>

The real dynamic of the philosophic struggle, thinks Niebuhr, must be explained in socio-economic terms. The eighteenth century philosophy of naturalism came to the fore with the rise of the middle class. Just as this class was in revolt against the old feudal order, so naturalism was in opposition to classic rationalism. When the rising middle class became dominant, however, the vitality and relativity went out of their naturalism, to be replaced by a rationalistic sense of established form. As this new bourgeois rationalism developed it showed itself more Stoic than Platonic. There was no strong tension between natural vitality and rational discipline, as the real differences were obscured. There was, in this bourgeois rationalism, no sense of the tragic.

The two protests today against rational man as essential man both are socially grounded protests against bourgeois capitalism as well. The romantic movement draws its strength from the lower middle classes and is expressed in the extravagances of fascism. Materialism, on the other hand, is a philosophy of the industrial worker and takes form as communism. These two social protests grow in strength and plausibility as middle-class power wanes.

In spite of their important truths, romanticism and materialism only hasten the process of decadence or effect an abortive regeneration. This is inevitable because neither of them sees the problem of human nature in sufficient depth. In its assertion of vitality, romanticism defies order, while its primitive unities prove inadequate. While hastening bourgeois decadence it puts nothing in its place. Marxist materialism, on the other hand, appears at first to offer a genuine principle of construction: a belief in reason. This turns out, however, not to be human reason but a sub-rational vital impulse controlled by dialectic. Marxism fosters the illusion that it can tame the destructiveness of man by a simple change in social organization. Class conflict is to be guided into a resolution of all conflict. In all of this Marxism is naively oblivious to its own pretensions. Thus do romanticism and materialism offer the conflicting panaceas of salvation through tribalism

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 49-53.





or through class conflict. Both the romantic and the Marxist practice violence behind a moral facade. Niebuhr thinks that the moral nihilism of romantic fascism is the worse of the two.

While the lower middle classes find their avenue of protest in fascism and the industrial workers' revolt takes the form of communism, so the upper class seeks the escape of Freudianism. Freud's doctrine reflects the conscience of the upper middle class that has discovered chaos under rational pretence but is unable to do anything about it. While the theory of the unconscious undercuts man's rational pretensions and civilization itself, the upper middle classes are too bound by privilege to rebel against society. For this reason their revolt turns inward, taking the form of a deep pessimism. In social history this is an elaboration of the romantic-materialistic protest against rationalism. The discipline of the superego (a social construct) leads to complexes and aberrations. Unable to break away from his social privileges and disciplines, or to find a real cure for his aberrations, upper middle class man escapes into pessimism.

#### Comment

The philosophies discussed in this chapter are not just idle, speculative theories, but aggressive, clamant gospels, inciting social conflict, change and conquest. Niebuhr views these contemporary philosophies in turn, each with its positive emphasis upon a legitimate aspect of human experience, but each ending in a distorted interpretation, the inevitable culmination of a one-sided approach. In contrast to these, he presents the Biblical viewpoint as one of sufficient scope and balance to appreciate the truths the various philosophies are concerned to establish and yet not fall into their excesses or the errors inherent in their partiality. If Niebuhr's observations be true, the task is to find ways of making the influence of Biblical ideas effective while at the same time maintaining the seemingly necessary separation of church and state in education. Separation of functions, though, should not be interpreted as conflict of philosophy.





The Social Consequences of the Destruction  
of Individuality in Modern Culture

Writing on "Individuality in Modern Culture"<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr regards individuality as having two roots, being the product of both nature and spirit. Genuine individuality is a human attribute, not known to animals, and involves spirit, freedom, self-transcendence, consciousness of self and the world and transcendence of natural processes. Human consciousness transcends nature and self. Man can modify nature endlessly. No human individual is like another. The individual has freedom within the limits of creatureliness. The limits are inexorable, but freedom makes individuals.

Human individuality is subject to development. Primitive man is submerged in the group and emerges only gradually. What emerges is original endowment, something that was there all the time. Primitive society with its rigidities had to be created to hold individuality in check. Because primitive society cannot achieve unity with variety it demands uniformity based on its pragmatically tested standards. Thus, primitive social rigidity is a witness to incipient and potential freedom. The individual has developed historically.

The Christian Sense of Individuality

According to Niebuhr, both the idea and the fact of individuality achieve their highest development in the Christian religion. The limits to the Christian idea of individuality are the law of love and the acknowledgement of creatureliness. Modern culture seeks to raise individuality beyond these limits, and ends by losing all.

Human life has an ultimate religious warrant: the heightened sense of individuality in Christianity, the human spirit's freedom bound only by the will of God and the fact that the secrets of the human heart are only known and judged by God. This Christian idea of individuality, however, is not antinomian. The "all things are yours" is balanced by "but ye are Christ's." The Christian individual holds his freedom always under God. The Christian does not lose his individuality, as in mysticism. The Christian concept of individuality transcends the limitations to

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., chap. iii.





individuality found in nature religions and national religions. Where individuality is overemphasized, anarchy results. In the medieval period "natural law" (Greek rationalism) and an authoritarian institution held down the individual in a way and to a degree not really Christian.

The modern sense of individuality came with the Renaissance and the Reformation. The Renaissance went beyond the Reformation in proclaiming the autonomous individual, who ushers in modern civilization and is annihilated by it. The Reformation, too, expressed a heightened sense of individuality in the doctrine of "The priesthood of all believers." In Reformation thought, though, the individual's dependence upon God is maintained. Without God freedom is meaningless.

The Protestant idea of responsibility to God is anti-legalistic. The idea of "natural law" is minimized, leaving no norm for the Christian but the ultimate one of direct responsibility to God. The weakness of this Protestant position is that it is so committed to the ultimate norm that it is difficult to work out support for relative standards in specific instances. This inability of Protestantism to relate to anything less than the ultimate norm is partly responsible for the anarchy of modern life. While committed to "the will of God," this is so general that it is difficult to apply in specific instances. Also, it is easy to forget "but ye are Christ's" and put the total emphasis upon "all things are yours."

#### Bourgeois Civilization and Individuality

While Protestantism represents the final heightening of individuality within Christianity, the Renaissance was the cradle of that very un-Christian concept and reality, the autonomous individual. The "scientific spirit" of the Renaissance played so great a part in the emancipation from religious dogmatism that its devotees have been blinded to its own perils. Ostensibly the Renaissance was a classical revival, yet classicism had no such concept of individuality. Individuality, says Niebuhr, is really a Christian idea, transplanted to the soil of classical rationalism to produce a concept and reality of autonomy foreign to classical and Christian thought alike. It was built on a medieval mystical idea of the infinite possibilities of the human spirit, with God thought of as the unique fulfillment of man, but not his judge. Bruno saw man becoming a god through contact with the transcendental object. The prophetic-Biblical





note of God as judge of man, whose thoughts are not our thoughts, is wholly lost. Thus the mystical doctrine of divine potentiality is subtly made the bearer of the new doctrine of the uniqueness of human individuality. So it is that, although the Renaissance doctrine of individuality has its origins in many sources, its main cultural roots are in Christianity. Why, though, did it arise just at this time?

The rise of the sense of individuality corresponds with the emergence of the commercial bourgeois classes in the city states of Italy. The self-reliant business man emerged, with social relations that were dynamic, as opposed to the static relations of medieval man. The new bourgeois man saw history as a realm of human decision rather than of destiny, and he saw nature as the instrument rather than the master of human will. The rise of natural science at first was a by-product of Renaissance self-reliance, but then gave more impetus to it. So it was that the pride and power of man subtly merged with the Christian idea of the significance of each man in the sight of God. Proof of this may be seen in the fact that modern industrial civilization developed in Protestant religious individualism and secular individualism.

The modern autonomous individual could not have arisen in any but a Christian culture. Yet, inevitably the progress of his thought destroys the Christian basis of individuality even as the development of industrial civilization destroys individuality. In the impersonal, mechanical processes of modern industrial society and the impersonal relationships of commerce, individuality is corroded and eroded away. Capitalistic controls fall into the hands of a few who wield unprecedented power, whose temptations they cannot resist. In our accelerated, dynamic society the results are more immediately destructive. The bourgeois individual perishes ingloriously, the hapless and impotent victim of an increasingly depersonalized society. The lower middle classes seek to maintain their identity in fascism while industrial workers espouse the Marxian protest.

#### The Preservation of Individuality

Niebuhr believes that the preservation of individuality in the face of forces that would engulf it depends upon (a) man's ability to maintain his loyalty to, and draw strength from a competing culture, and (b) his ability to hold to a religious interpretation of his situation from the aspect of the eternal. Only in a prophetic religion can individuality be





maintained, a religion that takes history seriously, but interprets it from "beyond history."

While no philosophy or religion can change the structure of human existence, it can have a bearing on whether the ego is able to maintain itself. Here naturalistic philosophy is lacking, because its outcome is the destruction of individuality in nationalism. Naturalism reduces individuality to an undifferentiated "stream of consciousness" or to mechanical proportions. Where conflict arises between individuals, the state is called in to mediate. Naturalism's inconsistency is that it interprets human history as human decisions, but postulates an individual who does not transcend social process sufficiently to make significant decisions. Spiritualistic philosophies, on the other hand, prompt the ego to flee history. The individual becomes lost in mysticism.

Niebuhr's conception of personality involves the "empirical ego" and the "transcendent ego." These are not two separate entities, but the same self in different roles, at different times, or at different stages of the total life process. The empirical ego is the self as involved in the unity of the body, while the transcendent ego is the pure ego standing above consciousness, as the consciousness of consciousness, with memory and foresight. This, in Niebuhr's view, is the real center of human personality. It is this which is able to function and survive when supported by prophetic faith. This dimension of depth in the human spirit transcends and eludes scientific method. Every rigorous effort to remain within the confines of pure science reduces psychology to bio-mechanics. Naturalistic psychology is inadequate, for man's ultimate unity and transcendence are beyond the range of the instruments and techniques of pure science.

Idealistic philosophies identify consciousness with mind and the highest reaches with divine or absolute mind, or some politically-conceived universal mind. Idealistic philosophy has the advantage over naturalism that it appreciates the depth of the human spirit. It sacrifices the advantage, however, by identifying the universal perspective with universal spirit. The self ceases to be self and becomes an aspect of the universal. This is in defiance of the fact that the actual self is joined to an organic particular. Sin becomes the inertia of man's animal nature in contrast to the universalities of mind. Although actually the





self is a narrow tower with a wide view, in idealism it is lost.

Not all forms of idealism lose the individual in the universal. There are pluralistic forms with a strong sense of individuality, such as Leibnitz and Herbart. Yet the indictment is true of all absolute idealism. In Kant the self maintains only a shadowy existence. The unvarying tendency in idealistic thought is for the self to become the SELF. In classical mysticism selfhood is evil and is to be swallowed up in undifferentiated unity. In Christian faith, on the other hand, man always remains a creature.

The socio-political outcome of idealism is the deification of the modern state, which is the largest convenient universal. Bosanquet points out this development in general terms. Hegel states it quite specifically in terms of Europe, Germany and Prussia. The historical culmination of this development, of course, is the blut und boden of Nazism. Thus idealistic thought leads to the expression of original sin at its worst. Far from being idealist, as is sometimes imagined, Christianity is the very opposite of this line of thought.

Romanticism, in Niebuhr's view, is the path modern man takes to escape the dilemma forced on him by the failure of both naturalism and idealism to do justice to individuality.

Within the alternatives of naturalism and idealism the modern man therefore faces either the submergence of both his individuality and his spirit in natural causality or the submergence of his individuality and the deification of his spirit in the universality of reason. Confronted with annihilation through either abasement or deification it is natural that modern culture should have sought for another way out. It found this way in romanticism.<sup>1</sup>

The political form and tool of romanticism is fascism. This begins as a protest on behalf of submerged individuality only to bring about the very annihilation it professes to avert.

Romanticism is a compound of Rousseauistic primitivism and Christian pietism. It seeks the "wisdom of the body" rather than that of the mind. It includes in the body feeling, imagination and will. The romantic quarrel with rationalism is really a quarrel of soul (psyche) in intimate relation with body against spirit conceived as mind. Through

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 82.



Christian pietism the body-soul's transcendence becomes spirit in its particularity. The "will to power" is spiritual.

The process of the destruction of individuality in romanticism follows a characteristic pattern: (1) The individual is given unqualified significance. (2) The thinker recoils from this deification. (3) He searches for a plausible, manageable larger individual. (4) The collective individual (or nation) supplants and swallows up the single individual.

Thus the romanticist meets the absolute idealist coming from the opposite direction and the two unite. This is the cultural history of modern nationalism. That is, Hegel and Nietzsche flow together to produce Fichte.

Having destroyed individuality, romanticism leads on to complete moral relativism. In Christianity the contingent features of life are made tolerable by their relation to the eternal. In romanticism, though, is limitless pretension. Lavater spoke of every man having his own religion just as he has his own face. Schleiermacher postulates "variety of meaning." Out of the ensuing anarchy comes Nietzsche with the solution of nihilism and the overriding "will to power and nothing else."

Seeking some embodiment, point of reference and spiritual home, and endeavoring to reduce the pretension and absurdity of its polytheism, romanticism culminates in the worship of the unique race and nation. Schleiermacher confesses that the individual cannot stand alone and expresses his own need for the strengthening that comes from "that German feeling." With him, the nation is the largest form of individuality as the person is the smallest. In the nation one finds oneself writ large.

In commenting upon the classical romanticists of Germany, Niebuhr says "It is not possible to appreciate and preserve particularity and uniqueness, whether individual or national, without either bringing it into relation with, and subordinate to, an ultimate centre and source of meaning or allowing the particular and the unique value to become itself an imperialistic centre of ultimate meaning."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 88.





In Fichte rationalism and romanticism arrive coincidentally at the same dead end as their universals shrink into nationalistic particulars. The idea of individuality is a tragically abortive concept, whose brief social history encompasses swift transition from individualism to collectivism, first industrial and finally racial. This process is inevitable in a society lacking the perspectives of a religious faith which finds the centre and source of life to be beyond and yet within historical existence.

Thus, argues Niebuhr, the cultural history of modern man gives him nothing to combat the drift to collectivism: not idealism, not naturalism and not romantic naturalism. Only Nietzsche preserves the individual, and he does so as a monster. Without the presuppositions of the Christian faith the individual is either nothing or becomes everything. In Christianity there is balance among various aspects of nature and spirit, creatureliness and freedom, human finitude and the power of God.

#### Comment

The destruction of individuality in modern culture undermines any theory of the development of individual autonomy through education. It also mocks the idea of moral responsibility. The only real "choice" the person is offered is that of conformity or flight into some type of nihilism. The central conclusion of this line of argument, of course, is that the grounding of man's thinking in a religious interpretation of his life from the aspect of the eternal enables him to maintain his individuality and his integrity. It is difficult to envisage the social and cultural expression of this idea apart from some institutional arrangement that will strongly resemble a church.

Niebuhr's argument regarding the social consequences of the destruction of individuality in modern culture is descriptive of a world of men who have lost their way. The idea of modern secular education as "challenging youth to the great adventure," in which unshackled post-Renaissance man is venturing daily into a brave new world of exciting surprises and ever-opening vistas as he follows his intelligence with religious devotion, comes down with a thump when one examines the social consequences of conflicting theories as they have unfolded in this, the great age of Renaissance fruition. However the relation of





church and state in education is worked out, if Niebuhr's description be true, the conclusion follows that moral development as an educational aim, or in any other context, cannot be considered realistically without taking into account the normative elements of religion. The attempt to do so is based upon a false reading of the situation. To be sure, with or without religion, education will continue to be moral development, and the manifold moralities of humanity will thrive, as heretofore. Recognition of the inadequacy of secularism as the context of moral development does not necessarily challenge the wisdom of separation of function of church and state in education. It is the concept of secularism itself and consequent claims as to the competence of secular education in moral development that are questioned.

### The Search for Causes

If the social consequences of conflicting theories are as chaotic and disastrous as Niebuhr describes, and if the loss of individuality is both a consequence of modern social deterioration and a cause of yet further degradation, it would seem sensible to look anywhere and everywhere for the causes. This, of course, modern men have done. Their answers, as Niebuhr points out, are various and contradictory. Their only unanimity, suggests Niebuhr, is in their neglect of the most pertinent and potent cause of human misery, man's own sinful nature. This explanation is regarded by modern men generally as a stumbling block and an offense. Men are not prepared to accept the diagnosis:

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,  
But in ourselves . . . <sup>1</sup>

### The Easy Conscience of Modern Man

Niebuhr observes that the one thing modern men seem agreed upon is moral complacency. While there is wide disagreement as to reasons and aims, there is virtually universal agreement upon human goodness. Man is never a sinner. He is the victim of his environment, he is ill, he has made an error of judgment, but he is, nevertheless, good. The Christian drama of salvation is rejected, not so much because it is incredible as that it is irrelevant; it simply doesn't matter. The sense of guilt is thought to be a vestigial remnant. Modern sophisticated man

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act I, Scene 2, line 139.

<sup>2</sup> Human Nature, chap. iv.



is emancipated from it.

Modern man has no grounds for this easy conscience, what with the social chaos and political anarchy of the twentieth century, Marxist tyranny and the hysterias and furies of fascism. Yet man tries to pass it all off by blaming bad institutions or ignorance, but never asking the question: How did he get this way?

With the advance in the understanding of nature has come a drastic misunderstanding of human nature, brought about by attempting to transfer the methods of natural science directly to the study of man. Because empirical method points to nature and mathematical procedures impress him with the powers of reason, these two: nature and reason, become the twin gods of modern man. When he interprets himself in terms of nature or reason, man fails to see that his freedom of spirit transcends both nature and reason. His failures and shortcomings he blames on historical accident, social institutions or insufficient education.

#### The Effort to Derive Evil from Specific Historical Sources

The inclination to find the source of evil in some particular historical event grows out of man viewing himself in simple one-dimensional history. This is related to the human tendency to attribute wrongdoing to temptation and thus escape responsibility. This all fails to explain why bad people have the power and inclination for evil.

Evil was attributed to the corrupting influence of religion or to tyrannical government in the eighteenth century, and to the iniquities and inequities of class organization in the nineteenth. Instead of indiscriminately condemning religion, the eighteenth century should have asked "Why is it that man is so prompted and tempted?" The world of nature knows nothing of priest kings and fanatic prophets. There is a religious element in all evil. A particular manifestation cannot be regarded as the source of a general evil. Eighteenth-century naturalists thought to beguile man with the serenities of nature. But, why is it impossible for man to enjoy this bovine serenity? Man cannot, by taking thought, reduce himself to the proportions of nature.

Modern culture attributes evils to specific historical causes without asking "Why?". Attributing evil to bad governors, bad priests or bad proprietors assumes a voluntarism in social theory which deterministic





psychology denies. Social contract theories attribute more freedom to man than the facts justify. Hobbes, with his social contract theory was diametrically opposed to the French naturalists, for whom salvation was freedom from social institutions. Hobbes illustrates the confusion of voluntarism in social theory linked with determinism in psychology. Locke attributed sin to nature and proposed to overcome it by decisions in history that have a freedom incompatible with his own naturalistic psychology and the facts of history and a virtue belied by history. In spite of himself the democratic naturalist trusts reason rather than nature.

The French Enlightenment expressed a simple naturalism, a return to justice by a return from history to nature. Man was told that he must not and cannot interfere with nature. But if he cannot, why bother to tell him that he must not? Physiocratic theory is simple anarchism: "Let pre-established natural and economic laws rule. Leave nature alone to take its course."

Marxism merely substitutes faulty economic organization for faulty political organization. According to Marxism, injustice arose when the unities of the early tribe were shattered by class distinctions and domination. Conscious behavior is reduced to the laws of motion of the physical world. This raises the question: "How, then, did man escape these original tribal harmonies in the first place and achieve the ability and the inclination to lord it over others?" Social evil is thus an elaboration of civilization. Marx would go forward to a new innocence, whereas Rousseau looked backward. This is the difference between communist and fascist social theories.

#### Nature as a Source of Virtue

The two modern hopes of eliminating wrongdoing are: (1) through political and economic reorganization and (2) through a return to nature. The modern naturalist has an easy conscience, thinking that he has not strayed far from the innocence of nature and can return easily. For Rousseau and followers the way back has been to destroy the uniquely human elaborations of nature in man's freedom. But human freedom is the source of creativity as well as vice. When the romantic naturalist seeks to re-establish harmony on the new level of "the general will," he simply does not understand human freedom. This "general will" which





is supposed to reside in mankind in the innocent natural state turns out to be nothing other than majority rule which, historically, falls under the tyranny of the manipulative minorities who achieve power.

In crying "back to nature" the romantic naturalists missed the point that nature is concerned with "the will to live," whereas man's difficulties arise because of his ambition, his "will to power." Succeeding thinkers have failed to explicate and answer this problem. Holbach proposed to eliminate the very government Hobbes had prescribed as necessary. Holbach was naively inconsistent in both implying and denying human freedom. He scolded man for getting away from nature, all the while implying that the way of nature is a necessity. Both Holbach and Helvetius insisted on "Back to nature," but ignored the question as to how man got away from nature in the first place.

James Mill, the utilitarian, trusted in "the harmlessness of the prudent egoist," believing that "the greatest number will judge right." John Stuart Mill held to this sophisticated hedonism with great difficulty, regarding reason rather than nature as the seat of virtue. Jeremy Bentham, the last of the utilitarians discovered the virtue of this enlightened rule by the majority was not as perfect as his predecessors had imagined. He found it was spoiled by the "principle of self-preference." To overcome this, Bentham suggested artificial political restraints, the "artificial identification of interest," i. e. government rewards and punishments.

David Hume swung to the opposite extreme from Rousseau. He trusted to reason to select the social and generous impulses, and attributed antisocial attitudes to the influence of nature. He was quite complacent about checking egotism by education. This belief that rational preference will guarantee virtue is a definite strand in modern thought. St. Simon adhered to it in his looking for its effective operation through parental affection and family influence, and overlooking the tendency of consanguinity simply to reinforce selfishness on the family level.

#### Niebuhr's Critique of Dewey

The thought of a typical naturalistic philosopher of the twentieth century, John Dewey, advances remarkably little beyond the perplexities and confusions of the previous centuries. He has the same difficulty in finding a vantage point for reason from which it may operate against the perils of nature and the same blindness toward the new perils of spirit which arise in the 'rational' life of man.





Dewey is in fact less conscious of the social perils of self-love than either Locke or Hume. In his thought the hope of achieving a vantage point which transcends the corruptions of self-interest takes the form of trusting the 'scientific method' and attributing antisocial conduct to the 'cultural lag,' that is, to the failure of social science to keep abreast with technology.

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 Professor Dewey has a touching faith in the possibility of achieving the same results in the field of social relations which intelligence achieved in the mastery of nature. The fact that man constitutionally corrupts his purest visions of disinterested justice in his actual actions seems never to occur to him. Consequently he never wearies in looking for specific causes of interested rather than disinterested action. As an educator, one of his favorite theories is that man's betrayal of his own ideals in action is due to faulty educational techniques which separate 'theory and practice, thought and action.' He thinks this faulty pedagogy is derived from the 'traditional separation of mind and body' in idealistic philosophy. In common with his eighteenth century precursors, he would use the disinterested force of his 'freed intelligence' to attack institutional injustices and thus further free intelligence. Despotic institutions represent 'relationships fixed in a pre-scientific age' and are the bulwark of anachronistic social attitudes. On the other hand 'lag in mental and moral patterns provide the bulwark of the older institutions.'

No one expresses modern man's uneasiness about his society and complacency about himself more perfectly than John Dewey. One half of his philosophy is devoted to an emphasis upon what, in Christian theology, is called the creatureliness of man, his involvement in biological and social process. The other half seeks a secure place for disinterested intelligence above the flux of process; and finds it in 'organized co-operative inquiry.' Not a suspicion dawns upon Professor Dewey that no possible 'organized inquiry' can be as transcendent over the historical conflicts of interest as it ought to be to achieve the disinterested intelligence which he attributes to it. Every such 'organized inquiry' must have its own particular social locus. No court of law, though supported by age-old traditions of freedom from party conflict, is free of party bias whenever it deals with issues profound enough to touch the very foundation of the society upon which the court is reared. Moreover, there can be no 'free co-operative inquiry' which will not pretend to have achieved a more complete impartiality than is possible for human instruments of justice. The worst injustices and conflicts of





history arise from these very claims of impartiality for biased and partial historical instruments. The solution at which Professor Dewey arrives is therefore an incredibly naive answer to a much more ultimate and perplexing problem than he realizes. It could only have arisen in a period of comparative social stability and security and in a nation in which geographic isolation obscured the conflict of nations, and great wealth mitigated the social conflict within a nation.<sup>1</sup>

In similar vein, Niebuhr traces the optimistic note running through various expressions of idealist philosophy, discussing Whitehead, Descartes, Hegel and Kant. He argues that, despite their different emphases, or their pessimism regarding other matters, the idealistic philosophers share with moderns generally in the complacency concerning human nature.<sup>2</sup> The general approach of these philosophers leaves man cut in two, with nature evil and reason good. Freedom is from nature, never from reason. The defiance of reason by spirit is inconceivable. The non-rational and immoral are equated as the consequences of the rebellion and defiance of natural passions and inclinations. Thus, in Niebuhr's view, idealism sees only half the problem. It is conscious of the paradox of involvement in and transcendence over natural process, but it cannot bring itself to define sin in terms of the violation of the good within freedom.

Niebuhr does qualify his assertion concerning the universality of the complacency concerning human nature. Yet even the exceptions manage, in the quality and emphasis of their pessimism to add to the unanimity of the denial of human responsibility.

The easy conscience of modern culture is practically unanimous, but not quite. It may be more correct to say that there are practically no exceptions to the easy conscience but there are exceptions to the general moral optimism. For there are pessimists about human nature, who are nevertheless of easy conscience, because they do not hold man himself responsible for the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 110-112. Niebuhr's quotations of Dewey are from Joseph Ratner in P. A. Schilpp (ed.) The Philosophy of John Dewey, p. 381, and John Dewey, Liberalism and Social Action, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1935, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 112-122.





evils in human nature. Hobbes is a pessimist in regard to the individual; but he is completely complacent about the moral qualities of the state. . . . Rousseau's romanticism is provisionally pessimistic; yet it becomes the very fountain of optimism in modern educational theory. Nietzsche's pessimism is thoroughgoing but even he is able to erect an ultimate optimism upon his conception of the superman . . . . Freud's pessimism is most thoroughgoing, but he finds no conscience to appeal to. His 'super-ego' performs the functions of Hobbes's state; but it cannot be given an unconditioned function of discipline, because it is feared that discipline will lead to new disorders in the unconscious life of the individual.<sup>1</sup>

This dominant emphasis of modern thought, however, in Niebuhr's view, is an optimism which persists not so much because it is modern as because it is human. And herein lies the explanation of man's widespread, persistent complacency.

This undercurrent of romantic pessimism and cynicism does not, however, deflect the main stream of optimism. The fact that modern man has been able to preserve such a good opinion of himself, despite all the obvious refutations of his optimism, particularly in his own history, leads to the conclusion that there is a very stubborn source of resistance in man to the acceptance of the most obvious and irrefutable evidence about his moral qualities. This source of resistance is not primarily modern but generally human. The final sin of man, said Luther truly, is his unwillingness to concede that he is a sinner. The significant contribution of modern culture to this perennial human inclination lies in the number of plausible reasons which it was able to adduce in support of man's good opinion of himself. The fact that many of these reasons stand in contradiction to each other did not shatter modern man's confidence in them; for he could always persuade himself of the truth of at least one of them and it never occurred to him that they might all be false.

Yet they were all false. Whether they found the path from chaos to order to lead from nature to reason or from reason to nature, whether they regarded the harmony of nature or the coherence of mind as the final realm of redemption, they failed to understand the human spirit in its full dimension of freedom. Both the majesty and the tragedy of human life exceed the dimension within which modern culture seeks to comprehend human existence. The human spirit cannot be held within the bounds of either natural necessity or rational prudence. In its yearning toward

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 120-121.



the infinite lies the source of both human creativity and human sin. . . .

The fact that man can transcend himself in infinite regression and cannot find the end of life except in God is the mark of his creativity and uniqueness; closely related to this capacity is his inclination to transmute his partial and finite self and his partial and finite values into the infinite good. Therein lies his sin.<sup>1</sup>

### Emerging Conclusions

In this chapter, various aspects of Niebuhr's thought, as a representative Christian viewpoint, have been examined. His criticism of modern theories is that their social consequences are disastrous, as they eventuate in fascism, communism or pessimism. While modern philosophies are mutually contradictory, they do have two common characteristics: they lead to the destruction of individuality and to the deadening of conscience. Niebuhr argues further that in modern thought there has been a general evasion of the basic cause of human strife and turmoil, which is in human nature itself. Man's difficulties continue to be aggravated and complicated because of human unwillingness to face up realistically to the source of the trouble.

The argument of this dissertation is that pragmatic philosophy in the context of the secular school is inadequate for development of the moral outlooks and attitudes which are needed. The Biblical perspectives, as they have been presented through Niebuhr's interpretations, are offered on their merits. They are no more "sectarian" than any other proposals that might be advanced for the common good. The difficulty in relating these Biblical concepts to pluralistic, secular, public education is recognized. Too often this difficulty has been magnified and made to appear as the only issue and an insurmountable one. To become obsessed with the problem of how to get or prevent "religion in the schools" is to lose sight of the greater need and to trifle with human destiny. It has already been suggested that fair, sympathetic and adequate treatment in the general curriculum by fair-minded, sympathetic and informed teachers is the most one can expect in the public schools of a pluralistic society. This need not be a threat to any group or individual. If even part

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 121-122.





of Niebuhr's argument in this chapter is right, one might hope that goodwill and concern for the future of humanity might have some slight influence upon those who, perhaps, have never bothered heretofore to look at the larger implications of the problem. Would it be too much to say that sectarianism is now a luxury that none can afford?

In considering the practical relationship of Biblical faith and perspectives to public education, is it not true that there are far greater threats to the integrity and usefulness of the public school than any posed by the churches. There is the need for mankind to find a "higher ground" from which to judge and resist the philosophies and social trends that tend to destroy individuality and vitiate moral responsibility. In terms of Niebuhr's argument, this higher ground is already well known, but has been abandoned by modern man in favor of a myriad of ineffectual expedients. The logical conclusion would appear to be that, if man wishes to retain his individuality and moral responsibility he will need to find his way back to the higher ground.





## CHAPTER VII

### THE DOUBLE FOCUS OF MORALITY

#### Introduction

No one can foresee the shape of moral challenge to come. Presumably the wiser members of the older generation will not be concerned with superimposing the imprint of their own morality upon those who follow, but rather with making available to them a flexible formula, adequate and adaptable. Whatever the shape of the future, there are four levels of challenge and response that suggest themselves. Whatever the ease or hardship of physical environment or economic conditions, the individual will have to rise to two challenges, if not three, and might have the privilege and requirement of a fourth. He will have to live with the facts of power. He must meet the requirements of justice. He may discover the advantages, and necessity, of mutuality. He may have the good fortune to become aware of the privilege of agape, and even to understand it as a requirement.

All this, however, must be seen against the sombre background of the morality of groups in their relationships with one another. The individual is so much at the mercy of world events. Millions die in wars they neither wished nor started. Political moves in one part of the world affect the lives of persons in distant places. Not only is the individual at the mercy of world events, but also, within the nation, he must make decisions and moral judgements upon a group basis, because he is a member of many groups: social, political, business or industrial. This means that the basic, unwilled, un-asked-for adjustment of the individual must be to groups over which he has little or no control, but whose decisions and actions determine his life. The crucial point here is that the moral basis of inter-group relationships is not the same as that of individuals.

The fact that distinctions are drawn between the morality of individuals and that of groups is a cause of confusion and distress. Indeed, much of the soul-searching of this generation has been caused by the discrepancies observed between individual and group behavior. It is here that



charges are made of inconsistency, hypocrisy and moral failure.

Niebuhr draws a clear distinction between the two levels of behavior. This he discusses in a chapter of Human Destiny and elaborates more fully in his Moral Man and Immoral Society.<sup>1</sup> A brief consideration of the individual's relationship to group morality appears necessary to the completeness of this dissertation. That it complicates matters may be taken as a reflection of the actual complexity and ambiguity of man's moral situation. This chapter also takes more the form of a drawing together of certain strands as the study moves to a conclusion.

### The Morality of Groups

Although he sees altruism as the very heart of Christian morality, Niebuhr does not think this same *agape* can be applied directly to the relationships of groups. Here problems of interest and balance of power present complex situations not sorted out as easily as relationships between individuals. In Moral Man and Immoral Society,<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr discusses the limits of altruism. He does not support the theory that a display of genuine altruism will soften hard hearts and turn them from selfishness to love. He believes that, unless they are restrained by force, cynical aggressors will see in a display of meekness only the opportunity for their own aggrandizement. Here the religious man's efforts at restraint and disinterestedness tend to become morbid. That the inner restraint is necessary as a check upon egoism is not doubted. That *agape* is the ideal human relationship is not questioned. Its direct application to inter-group conflict, though, Niebuhr regards as unrealistic. In collective situations egoistic impulses gain ascendancy over the social ones and are not held in check by the same inner sanctions that operate in individuals. Social control, with all its moral perils, thus becomes a necessity.

Here Niebuhr distinguishes between religious and political morality. While religious morality will have political consequences, it is not primarily concerned with social outcomes, but rather with "righteousness for its own sake" regardless of the outcome.

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., chap. x.





If we contemplate the conflict between religious and political morality it may be well to recall that the religious ideal in its purest form has nothing to do with the problem of social justice. It makes disinterestedness an absolute ideal without reference to social consequences. It justifies the ideal in terms of the integrity and beauty of the human spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Niebuhr contends that the idealism of pure religion is not concerned with the social problem and does not cherish the illusion that material advantages will come out of the refusal to assert claims to them. The outcome is a policy of non-resistance, with no claims to social efficacy. Thus religious morality leads finally to asceticism or political irresponsibility. As will be seen later, it is not claimed that religious morality has no effect. Its consequences are different than those who practice it sometimes imagine.

The Christian ethic of love operates fully only in intimate relationships. As the circle is widened, however, the simple ethic of altruistic love is more difficult to apply. It is difficult for groups to act unselfishly or to appreciate such actions in other groups. Altruistic love calls for sacrifice. While an individual may be prepared to act thus on his own behalf, how does he justifiably sacrifice the interests of others or of a group? Historically, efforts to apply the pure morality of disinterestedness to group relations have failed.<sup>2</sup> Where these efforts have been most sincerely undertaken, the results have been politically impossible. The nature of groups is such that they do not possess the imagination, insight and sensitivity either to initiate or to appreciate altruism on the group level. Human communities are inevitably selfish.

There is, in other words, no possibility of harmonizing the two strategies designed to bring the strongest inner and the most effective social restraint upon egoistic impulse. It would therefore seem better to adopt a frank dualism in morals than to attempt a harmony between the two methods which threatens the effectiveness of both.<sup>3</sup>

This is to suggest that the citizen of the world will need a double focus upon morality, as it were, and will need to avoid confusion of thought as to which is appropriate in a given situation. The difficulty

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.263.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp.268 ff.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp.270-271.





anticipated, of course, is that the overwhelming influence and prestige of political morality will lead impressionable minds to the conclusion that this is the only type of morality that works or matters. The other problem, as Niebuhr sees it, is the attempt to apply altruism to inappropriate situations with tragic and frustrating results. Distressing as this latter outcome might be, is not the more likely eventuality that the majority, influenced by propaganda, fear and pragmatic success, will accept political morality as a norm, even though with cynicism and secret misgivings?

### The Facts of Power

The moral development of the individual, if there are real individuals left to develop in the future society, will be not only over against the background of the moves and counter-moves of national states and alliances, and such socio-economic alignments as may emerge, but also will be subject to the facts of power within the nation and community. Either subtly or overtly the individual will be the target of the pressures, exploitation and manipulation of those who exert some measure of community control or who aspire to such power and privilege. There is nothing new in this, except that the trends of modern society appear to make the individual ever more vulnerable, and less able to maintain his integrity and identity in the face of massive institutions, mass communications and masses of people.

In analyzing this problem, Niebuhr notes<sup>1</sup> that, historically, various types of power have derived from different social functions: military, priestly or political. Belief in economic power as basic, with all others derivative, is a modern and erroneous idea. While this belief does hold in bourgeois thinking, economic power, before the modern period, was derivative. Political power rests upon the manipulation of other types. In early empires these were priestly and military. Modern democracy seeks to divorce political power from social function and spread it evenly. This serves to check, but not prevent oligarchies.

The power situation in any community determines the form and extent of the structures of justice. In modern democratic-capitalistic societies the balance is between political and economic power. Niebuhr thinks that

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<sup>1</sup>Human Destiny, pp. 260 ff.



this tension may never be resolved. He points to the Nazi tyranny as a modern example of imbalance, with its merger of political, economic, religious and military power.

Types of power manipulation in social life vary from appeals to reason to the use of physical force. Because power is based upon reason is no argument for its virtue or goodness, for reason may be prostituted in the service of the ego in competition with others. Rational solutions may be very unjust. Spiritual qualities also may be used to dominate others: possession or pretension of virtue, heroic life, gentle birth and similar indirect intangible means may be used to dominate. Pure physical power is used only as a last resort and on primitive levels. It usually is in the background of various types of spiritual domination. The more subtle approaches are not necessarily any more just.

Power shifts come as a result of historical developments. Through modern commerce, the middle class arose to challenge the feudal priestly-military oligarchy. Technical development more recently has shifted power to its manipulators and has given industrial workers their own means of manipulation. Sometimes the shift in power has spiritual origins. In times past prophetic religion has challenged and helped destroy priestly-military oligarchies, while in other instances conservative religion has strengthened oligarchies by equating political power with divine authority.<sup>1</sup>

The threat of overweening power, thinks Niebuhr, is coped with most successfully by maintaining an equilibrium of power which discourages the aggression of the strong. At its best this is a system of justice. Unless it is consciously managed, though, it can degenerate into anarchy. It calls for an organizing center to arbitrate, manage and manipulate, and at times coerce. Thus the principle of government is higher than that of mere balance of power.

Government, however, is morally ambiguous. Sometimes it expresses the will of a dominant class. At other times it grows on its own power and becomes an end in itself, stifling freedom and eventuating in idolatry. The "majesty" of states is in part pretension and in part legitimate.

The majesty of the state is legitimate insofar as it embodies and expresses both the authority and

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.264.





power of the total community over all its members, and the principle of order and justice as such against the peril of anarchy. The legitimate majesty of government is acknowledged and affirmed in the Christian doctrine of government as a divine ordinance.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, however, governments invariably make illegitimate pretensions of majesty and sanctity, hiding the contingent nature of their rule and claiming unconditioned validity for it. The development of democratic justice has been the effort to cope with these moral ambiguities. This is accomplished best in those systems which make provision for effective opposition to and criticism of the government constitutionally, i. e. within the machinery of government. In achieving this system, it has been necessary to wend a tortuous way between the over-zealous advocates of freedom on the one hand and order on the other. Each have feared the evils of the other and gone to extremes of anarchy or repression. These mistakes reflect the viewpoints of various Christian and secular traditions.

#### The Requirements of Justice

While the individual must relate himself to the realities of group morality and to the facts of power within his own group, he is also faced with the requirements of justice as they are interpreted and enforced in the society of which he is a member. What is called "justice" will be a compromise "between the rational-moral ideals of what ought to be, and the possibilities of the situation as determined by given equilibria of vital forces."<sup>2</sup> Both of these perspectives, however, will be subject to what Niebuhr calls "ideological taint," the inevitable influence of the community's own self-interest.

Such rules of justice as we have known in history have been arrived at by a social process in which various partial perspectives have been synthesized into a more inclusive one. But even the inclusive perspective is contingent to time and place. The Marxist cynicism in regard to the pretended moral purity of all laws and rules of justice is justified. Marxism is right, furthermore, in regarding them as primarily rationalizations of the interests of the dominant elements of a society.<sup>3</sup>

Thus do the realities of group morality and the facts of power within the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.267.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.257.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.252.





group force themselves upon the individual as he is confronted with the majesty of government and law which may embody much of what he believes to be right and at the same time arbitrarily demand of him obedience to and acceptance of that which he believes to be wrong.

It is at this point that secular education, under the control of the state, is most vulnerable and open to question as a custodian or agent of moral development. While pressures may be subtle, and guidance "from above" by inference and implication, the very climate of the school cannot fail to be affected by interference under the guise of assumed concern for the welfare of the group and the further assumption that such concern is right. Ways must be found to foster moral development that will be more than blind conformity leading to eventual disillusion, cynicism and despair.

Even when the "ideological taint" has been recognized and taken into account, that which remains as justice is more than a negative balancing out of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. The concept of justice, positively considered, contains redemptive possibilities for individual life and integrity. It also opens a way for individuals in some measure to transcend and to alleviate the otherwise overwhelming pressures and influences of autonomous groups and power combinations who see their own interests and justice as synonymous. Niebuhr proposes this positive view of justice:

Systems and principles of justice are the servants and instruments of the spirit of brotherhood insofar as they extend the sense of obligation towards the other, (a) from an immediately felt obligation, prompted by obvious need, to a continued obligation expressed in fixed principles of mutual support; (b) from a simple relation between the self and one 'other' to the complex relations of the self and the 'others'; and (c) finally from the obligations discerned by the individual self, to the wider obligations which the community defines from its more impartial perspective. These communal definitions evolve slowly in custom and in law. They all contain some higher elements of disinterestedness, which would not be possible to the individual self.<sup>1</sup>

Thus a system of justice can be the ordered expression of positive concern for the welfare of others. If it is to be this, though, the motivation

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.248.



and inspiration will need to be other than that provided by the self-preserving group or the self-seeking manipulators of power within the group. The individual must be persuaded at least that such justice is in his own interest, and at best that it is right for its own sake. In other words, it must be undergirded at least by a recognition of the benefits of mutuality and at best by the insight that altruism is "a more excellent way,"<sup>1</sup> and is its own reward.

#### The Advantages and Necessity of Mutuality

In Moral Man and Immoral Society,<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr discusses rational morality as intermediary between political and religious morality. Political morality, as already described, is the self-preserving, hard-bargaining, balance-of-power morality of the group. Religious morality is of the quality of altruism. Niebuhr describes advocates of rational morality as inclined to settle for duty rather than disinterestedness and usually tending towards utilitarianism. They view human conduct from the social perspective, and find their ultimate standards in some general good. They sanction both egoism and altruism, only asking that the former be reasonably expressed. Niebuhr sees this line of thought as running from Aristotle to John Dewey.<sup>3</sup>

The utilitarian attempt to harmonize the inner and outer perspectives of morality is inevitable and, within limits, possible. It avoids the excesses, absurdities and perils into which both religious and political morality may fall. By placing a larger measure of moral approval upon egoistic impulses than does religious morality and by disapproving coercion, conflict and violence more unqualifiedly than politically oriented morality, it manages to resolve the conflict between them. But it is not as realistic as either. It easily assumes a premature identity between self-interest and social interest and establishes a spurious harmony between egoism and altruism.<sup>4</sup>

The only love that human experience justifies in terms of direct and obvious reward is that based upon mutuality. Unrequited or unreciprocated love, persisted in, from a human standpoint, becomes foolishness. But mutuality is a tender plant. If the reciprocation is not forthcoming, the love is no longer justified, and withers away.

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<sup>1</sup>I Corinthians 12:31, A. V.    <sup>2</sup>Op. cit., chap. x.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 259-260, 35.    <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 261.





Indeed, even to initiate mutuality, someone must make a venture of faith and do the kind deed. But if this is done only with the hope of reciprocation, what sort of love is this? Unless it has a deeper source of inspiration, it will soon die. Even while it flourishes, it does so precariously, always with its quality and motivation suspect. In the last analysis, man is held to it simply because it is in his own self-interest to go on cultivating mutuality. Indeed he finds that, to preserve his life, he must. But what remains is a prudentialism, hardly worthy of the name love and hardly to be relied upon under pressure and in adversity. This scarcely sounds like the foundation upon which to build the structure of justice, or community life, not to mention family life.

### The Privilege and Requirement of Agape

The culmination of this line of argument is that the basic requirement of man's life as man is agape, the selfless love spoken of in the New Testament,<sup>1</sup> and whose distinguishing quality is altruism. If ever man is to escape his age-long bondage to autonomous groups whose power struggles are carried on heedless of individual life and welfare, the exploitation and manipulation by the powerful within the community, and the corruption of justice itself, it will be when the moral initiative within him has the independent inspiration and motivation to maintain a steady altruism in the face of all the obvious contradictions of human life and organization. This is no simple argument that if only all men would be good and loving all would be well. The problem is too complicated for any such simplistic solution. The complexity and size of human society dictates that political morality is an essential, as are the wielding of power and exercise of leadership within the community. While the Christian ethic of love may operate fully only in interpersonal relationships, it is the spark essential to the ignition of mutuality, and is the leaven of political morality.

Complete mutuality, with its advantages to each party to the relationship, is therefore most perfectly realized where it is not intended, but love is poured out without seeking returns. That is how the madness of religious morality, with its trans-social ideal, becomes the

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<sup>1</sup>John 13:35.





wisdom which achieves wholesome social consequences. For the same reason a purely prudential morality must be satisfied with something less than the best.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr comments further that moral good will may mitigate even though it cannot obviate group conflict. He urges the necessity of cultivating the strictest individual moral discipline and idealism, both for the sake of individual life and for the mitigating influence upon social conflict.

Niebuhr suggests that one point at which high personal morality does make a decisive impact upon communal morality is in group leadership. To be socially useful, a group leader must be free from self-seeking and capable of restraining personal ambition and interest. Indeed, within the social struggle, all individuals still are obliged to check their own egoism, regard the interests of others, and thus enlarge the area of cooperation.

We live in an age in which personal moral idealism is easily accused of hypocrisy and frequently deserves it. It is an age in which honesty is possible only when it skirts the edges of cynicism. All this is rather tragic. For what the individual conscience feels when it lifts itself above the world of nature and the system of collective relationships in which the human spirit remains under the power of nature, is not a luxury but a necessity of the soul. Yet there is beauty in our tragedy. We are, at least, rid of some of our illusions. We can no longer buy the highest satisfactions of the individual life at the expense of social injustice. We cannot build our individual ladders to heaven and leave the total human enterprise unredeemed of its excesses and corruptions.<sup>2</sup>

Life lived with agape as its ideal and aspiration is a personal privilege, in the sense that those who accept it must do so of their own free choice and volition. But while it is a personal privilege, the argument offered here is that it is a social requirement if man is to approximate his moral and spiritual potential as a human being. It is the indispensable element needed to leaven man's corporate life and redeem his corporate morality. Man needs it to maintain his individuality in the face of the ever-present threat of insignificance, degradation, submergence and extinction implicit in the autonomous group's total demands upon him. He can make a useful and significant contribution towards ameliorating political morality by introducing the personal note of agape, whether as leader or follower, or as ambassador of good will across group boundaries to individuals in

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<sup>1</sup>Moral Man and Immoral Society, pp. 265-266.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 276-277.



other groups. Agape enables man to withstand the pressures of power manipulators within his own group, as he cooperates with them for the common good, but has the inner resources to withstand them where necessary and to make such witness to "a more excellent way" as will be a continuous obstacle and standing rebuke to those who interpret the responsibilities of power as the mandate to special privilege. Agape is required to act as a continual leavening and purifying agent to community standards and structures of justice, throwing into clear relief the corruptions of justice, that they may be seen for what they are, and constantly working to strengthen and expand the concept of justice as the expression of organized brotherhood and orderly goodwill and concern for the welfare of all. Agape is required to inspire and ignite the emotions and attitudes of love in the context of mutuality, through unilateral initiative and to keep providing fresh opportunities for the development of mutuality.

Perhaps the individual may inspire himself into a state of agape. Perhaps the institutions of a secular society, including the secular school will evoke from him this response. Perhaps he will be encouraged to this way of life by the institution which considers agape the heart and substance of its gospel and its reason for being.

As will be seen, the course of enquiry in this dissertation has not led to the advocacy of some unrealistic denominational program in the schools. Criticism has been made of secularism as the total context of education, and of the acceptance of such secular philosophies as pragmatism as the philosophy underlying public education. There are good reasons for the separation of church and school. These have to do with the pluralistic nature of society, the nature of the gospel, what constitutes good educational practice, and the importance of preventing domination of one institution by another. A reason sometimes advanced, but criticized here, is the presumed superiority of pragmatism over the allegedly outdated and increasingly irrelevant teachings of Christianity. The separation of church and school must not be interpreted as a mandate for secularism. The question raised in this dissertation is as to the adequacy of secularism, and specifically pragmatism, in their ability to foster the sort of moral development needed by the individual to cope with the complex life facing the oncoming generation.





The secular school is in the impossible position of being entrusted with a task of child development which is moral development in almost every phase, and yet having to attempt that task with an essential element missing. It is in the paradoxical position of needing what the Christian Church has to offer and yet not being able to appropriate what is needed, except by indirect methods. The view that the Christian gospel, in the sense that it has been interpreted and considered in this dissertation, should underlie the philosophy of education, or that any philosophy of education should at least be related intelligently to the gospel rests upon two propositions. The first is that the Christian interpretation of man's nature and need is pertinent, in keeping with the realities of life, and has in its agape a requirement essential to man's moral development in his present situation. The second is that the way of life characterized as agape is a distinctively Christian concept. It draws its inspiration from the teaching and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. While it may be approached and approximated from many different angles and under different names, throughout the world agape is recognized as the distinctively Christian mark of recognition. Even where Christians and their churches are being accused of failure, a popular condemnation is that "they are not acting like true Christians, because they don't practice the selfless love they profess." To say that selfless love is practiced in varying degrees by people other than Christians does not alter the fact that it is the hallmark of Christian genuineness. The conclusion of the argument is that moral development as an educational aim, if it is to be effectual, requires the close and sympathetic cooperation of secular school and Christian church, and all the more so because of their necessary separation. There is nothing in this proposal which bars any other group, institution or individual which has a formula for altruism from joining in the cooperative endeavor.





## CHAPTER VIII

### RECAPITULATION AND CONCLUSIONS

#### Recapitulation of the Argument

In Chapter I the problem implicit in the thesis title is identified as the relevance of Christianity to moral development as an educational aim. Christianity is defined as "according to Niebuhr," and education is thought of as that which is the work of the schools. The objective of the dissertation is further delimited by the choice of Niebuhr's definitive work, The Nature and Destiny of Man, with some reference to Moral Man and Immoral Society, and the wording of the dissertation title is stressed, specifying, as it does, concern for moral development as an educational aim. The main concern is with goals and sense of direction in educational policy rather than with detailed programs. The nature of Niebuhr's material imposes this condition. Niebuhr has much to say about goals. For a study of classroom procedures and administrative arrangements, one would look elsewhere. To understand Niebuhr's view of human nature and human destiny, though, is to have comprehended his answer to the question of moral development as an educational aim.

What emerges from the study in its relation to education is virtually a theory of personality dynamics. Perhaps it would be most accurate to call it just that. It may be that not only is this the appropriate way to relate Niebuhr's views to educational theory, but also it is recognition of an important and long-observed connection.

As this material is reviewed, certain principles of interpretation emerge. One concerns the necessity of a truly interdisciplinary approach. No consideration should be ruled out because of its frame of reference. In this instance, the secularist habit of discounting certain ideas because they are religious or theological is questioned. The material presented in theological context in Niebuhr's treatment of the Christian view of man has vital connections with psychology, sociology and philosophy. Niebuhr's arguments deserve consideration on their merits. Another emerging principle of interpretation concerns symbolism and figurative language.





In the prophetic-Biblical faith, as in other affirmations of human belief, faith and aspiration often are stated symbolically. One has not disposed of an idea by a denial or disproof of figurative language. A third principle is that the idea expressed in the figurative language often is the fruit not only of generations but of ages of human experience. This does not make it necessarily right or relevant. It may, however, be a good thing that Biblically-based ideas do not change as rapidly as do the theories and textbooks of some other disciplines.

In Chapter II Niebuhr's basic position is outlined. Niebuhr does not deal directly either with educational theory or with the moral aspects of the educational process. He does concern himself with a view of man and the world which would underlie educational theory. Niebuhr admits that, like any other world view, the Christian outlook rests upon presuppositions. These concern God, a monist view of man, how man must be understood from the standpoint of God, the possibility and actuality of revelation apprehended by faith, and the revelation of God in Christ. These Niebuhr describes as ultra-rational presuppositions. He contends that they are necessary as an adequate basis for an explanation or understanding of man. In man, beyond nature and intellect, is the aspect of transcendence. Man's basic problem is seen to be not finiteness, but sin, growing out of anxiety and unwillingness to accept his creaturely state. In elaborating these assumptions, Niebuhr enunciates the principle of adequacy as the appropriate criterion of interpretation.

The prophetic-Biblical faith, as Niebuhr views it, is, above all else, an interpretation of history, and one of such perspective, stability and hope as to provide men with a ground of faith on which to stand and thus to withstand the vicissitudes of life. In it conflicting ideologies are transcended, individuality is cherished, moral pretensions are exposed and man is encouraged to view his world with realism and himself with honesty. Man is encouraged to believe in the goodness of life, but also in the moral context of history and the contingent nature of its outcomes, depending upon his own response. The central criterion, of course, is God revealed in Christ and apprehended by faith. The very great difficulty of reconciling these ideas with secularist philosophies or integrating these Christian views into a secular curriculum is balanced by the counter-question as to the adequacy of secular education as an agency of moral development, with Christian considerations evaded or obscured.





The argument of Chapter III revolves around four propositions, concerning man's God-like transcendence, creaturely finiteness, anxious sin and essential goodness. These are moving, dynamic and controversial ideas. While they may be elaborated and discussed in a curriculum, they are, really, morally freighted and spiritually charged. Their impact is emotional and subjective. They invite acceptance or rejection and, if accepted, offer a basis of life adjustment which teachers and counselors presumably would cherish for their students.

The attribute of God-like transcendence, once recognized, acknowledges a dimension of human possibilities both in the direction of righteousness and sin. Man as image of God, with Christ as trans-historical norm is a view of human nature scarcely credible to secular educators and hence somewhat beyond their ability or willingness to proclaim or to teach. While the same secularists may find creaturely finiteness not so difficult to accept, the idea of man as sinner may be expected to encounter resistance. This latter is supposed to be bad psychology and an especially unwise approach to the young. Even granting the correctness of this Biblical diagnosis of human nature, in a secular school system, with many persons neutral or unsympathetic to Christianity, this view of human nature will be less than popular. The conviction of human sin is not arrived at by logical argument or objective research. It is an individual discovery, and can hardly be explained to others by people who have not experienced it and are not only intellectually sceptical of it but emotionally on the defensive against it. Thus the real controversy is not over the credibility of Biblical stories, but over the moral impact of the gospel on man's life. How can a secular school in a pluralistic society cope with this? On the other hand, how can a school do justice to the moral development of its students without it?

By its nature and orientation, secular education tends to place its major emphasis upon day-to-day or short-term adjustment of students to their environment. With the current diversification of the curriculum, this becomes even more the case. Preoccupation, understandably, is with the student's interests and abilities, what vocational choices are open and which ones are feasible for him. Even concern with language and mathematics becomes more utilitarian as the curriculum makers pay more heed to the students' question, "But why must I learn that? Of what use will that be to me?"





There is, however, another level of adjustment that the individual may make. To be sure, many never make it, but spend their lives floundering. It may be called the ultimate adjustment, or life orientation, as opposed to the numerous obvious and partial ones. It concerns his understanding of and attitude to himself, the world and his life. It becomes his conviction or faith as to the underlying meaning and purpose of his existence. While human beings may subsist without this orientation or adjustment, their stature as human beings is somewhat diminished.

While, to persons preoccupied with more immediate interests, this life orientation may seem an option for dilettantes, its true importance becomes evident at those junctures of life where the proximate adjustments prove inadequate, frustrating and disappointing. When, in the deep places of life, the question is asked, "Why?", that student is unprepared whose education has been solely in terms of the proximate adjustments of life. Indeed, it may be argued that if the concentration is exclusively upon proximate adjustments, the end result is maladjustment even here, as the student, unable to find answers as to "Why?" becomes bogged down in middle-aged futility and discovers within himself no answer except to strive more desperately to "get ahead" vocationally and socially, because this is the only criterion he has been taught.

This is an argument for the retention of the humanities in the curriculum. It is also a suggestion that the prophetic-Biblical faith, the Christian approach to life, is a wiser, more mature one than the secular-utilitarian approach. If nothing else, it makes for mental health. The Christian point of view is that because of man's very constitution as synthesis of nature and spirit, he cannot find satisfaction for his longing and expression for his potential apart from faith in and communion with a God who is both transcendent and immanent.

In Chapter IV, on the fulfillment of man's life as it is understood from the standpoint of the Christian faith, Niebuhr's treatment of New Testament ideas of the meanings and goals of life is discussed. These Christian ideas are seen in contrast to those of rival philosophies, and are expressed in terms of the teaching of Jesus and the interpretation of his life and ministry in the New Testament. At the conclusion of the chapter, the writer offers a brief portrayal of what might be the thoughts, attitudes and contributions to life of a person whose moral development has been





influenced by these same Christian ideas.

The material of Chapter IV is heavily weighted with Niebuhr's view of the Christian interpretation of history. History is treated as meaningful and purposeful. A fulfillment is looked for. History is not reduced to nature, but is regarded as more than a meaningless natural sequence. On the other hand, historical meaning and human identity are not lost in mysticism. Christian Messianism is not egoistic, nationalistic, nor ethical-universal, but prophetic in the sense that all humanity is seen as under God's judgement and in need of redemption. Is it not this challenge to human complacency that makes Christianity unacceptable to secular thought? Nevertheless, this same prophetic witness against the evil in man's good, and the redemption offered, objectionable though it may seem, is an element not to be obscured or omitted from any realistic curricular inclusion. Such an omission distorts the prophetic-Biblical interpretation of history.

Sacrificial love is set forth as the norm of human morality, rather than mutuality. Christ's relationship to humanity is seen as not a matter of metaphysics but of agape. To believe in Christ is to have faith that this agape is the central intention of life, God's cherishing of man, and also that it is the highest human possibility, even though it remains only a pull, an approximation and an aspiration. The Cross, as an event in history, completes, clarifies and corrects man's idea of virtue.

Life is seen as full of purpose, being lived under an over-arching eternity and moving towards a telos. This is no inevitable or painless escalation, though, as each new level of achievement reveals its own characteristic inherent moral challenge, its Antichrist. Thus history is neither an experience of meaningless despair nor inevitable evolution to Utopia, but an arena of genuine moral development.

One might ask why it would not be possible just to emphasize agape, the ideal of selfless love, and omit all the theological baggage. Would there not be widespread agreement upon agape as an ideal? Whether people actually believed it or not, would they not support it rather than appear to be against such a noble thing? To ask the question is to give the answer. To speak of selfless love as a disembodied ideal is to present just that, and nothing more: a disembodied ideal which will be honored with lip service and then quietly dismissed as impractical and unrealistic.





It is agape introduced into life historically as a revelation of God that gives it power. No longer is it seen as a wistful aspiration, but as the divine intention.

This is why the historical nature of Christianity is stressed. This prophetic-Biblical faith is an interpretation of history, set in the context of history. It is neither a naturalistic interpretation of life nor a mystical flight from life, but an affirmation that human affairs are real and significant, and that human aspirations are no illusion. When man turns to this interpretation hopefully, however, he becomes offended at an explanation which ends with the perfect man, the revelation of divine love, broken on the Cross. Yet the Cross itself is that which reveals the very quality of perfection and love.

Here the matter rests unless man can understand, by faith, that the incredible stories of resurrection and second coming do not depend upon their literal interpretation but upon their spiritual affirmation, and that they do express the invincible surmises of mankind about life and the most mature discoveries of what is valuable in life. Thus agape, so acceptable as a disembodied ideal for lip service, remains just that until it is "embodied" or, in New Testament terms, incarnated and made flesh. It is for this reason that the prophetic-Biblical faith, as such, is important to the curriculum if agape is to be anything more than a wistful ideal, soon abandoned in cynicism.

Chapter V describes the inner dynamics of moral development as understood and experienced in the lives of Christian believers. Niebuhr notes the primacy of the doctrine of regeneration as normative and descriptive of what transpires in inner life and social relationships. He stresses the distinctively Protestant tenet of justification by faith, with the differences implied in the nature of moral development as conceived in secular, Roman Catholic and Protestant terms. It is noted that not only the idea of what transpires in moral change, but also the goal is differently conceived between secularism and Protestantism, as reflected in the respective conceptions of grace. The material of this chapter heightens the question as to whether church and school are to be in competition, offering different theories as to the goal and how to get there, with the secular school undertaking to replace the Protestant church, or whether an attempt at synthesis and understanding is possible. Before the





first alternative is accepted, possible social consequences of the complete triumph of secularism should be considered.

If it is accepted that the processes of secular education are, of themselves, adequate to moral development, there is no argument. If, on the other hand, the Christian experience of regeneration is seen as in any way helpful, desirable or necessary, a situation of dilemma ensues. It would appear obvious that the dynamics of Christian experience cannot be fostered in the context of secular education in a pluralistic society. This is the work of the church. As a result of this situation, though, the school, as an agency of moral development is being asked to operate with an incomplete approach, to act with one hand tied, as it were. On the one hand it appears impossible to relate the resources of Christian personality dynamics to secular education, and on the other it appears impossible for secular education to achieve the goals of moral development with only secular resources. The consequences of secular dominance are the next consideration.

Niebuhr's comparison of competing philosophies with regard to their social consequences is the subject of Chapter VI. The argument is that destructive modern philosophies are continually making their bid for dominance throughout the world. It is not contended that secularism is necessarily a destructive philosophy, but rather that the secular school, as a creature of the community is especially sensitive and susceptible to the pressures of aggressively-led movements, power blocs and civil governments. Its flexibility becomes its weakness, and its lack of continuing norms of the type accepted by the prophetic-Biblical faith leaves it without a central rallying point or will to resist. Chameleon-like, the secular system changes to accommodate itself to dominant trends in society. While, from a technological and economic standpoint, this may be desirable, it may also result in moral failure due to lack of a clear and definite point of reference beyond social relativities.

The social consequences of certain modern philosophies, in Niebuhr's view, are manifested, of course, in the lives of persons. One such effect is the destruction of individuality. The individual is "lost," with the consequent frustration of any ideas of individual autonomy. A further logical consequence is the loss of moral responsibility as men, conscious that they have become ciphers, blame their evils upon environment, and wrong social arrangements, or excuse themselves because of errors or illness, but never taking the blame unto themselves.





Perhaps it is at this point that the advocates of Christian influence in education make their strongest case. Exclusion of Christianity does not ensure a neutral or uncontrolled educational system. The philosophy of secularism is itself a point of view and a system of value judgements about meanings, purpose and morality. Furthermore, as indicated, it is subject to subversion by aggressive, competing philosophies.

This line of argument culminates in Chapter VII, where Niebuhr's distinction between the morality of groups and that of individuals is related to the problem of moral development as an educational aim. A school whose moral leadership draws its inspiration only from the political morality of nations and other dominant groups, or from the morality of mutuality of a prudentially-oriented business community will give leadership that is a faithful reflection of the same political morality and prudentialism. The futility of these moralities lies in the inability of those who live by them to get beyond considerations of power and mutuality. The deadlock of "an-eye-for-an-eye" morality and "I'll-love-you-if-you-love-me" mutuality is broken by individuals who rise above this in the spirit of selfless love, the central characteristic of Christian morality, known as agape. This altruism is not likely to flourish in a social climate hostile to it and cynical of it. The structure of secular society does not provide for altruism, although its large groups and power manipulators gladly accept the selfless servitude of individuals and call it altruism. This is something different, though, than freely offered agape.

While agape is kindled in human hearts in many places, and asserts itself in spite of the logic of secular society, the one group with which this selfless love is associated characteristically is the Christian Church. Indeed, if any one thing might be said to bind all varieties of Christians together and be acknowledged as the common bond, would it not be the universal confession that agape is the heart of the gospel? That the witness of individual Christians very often is weak and inconsistent is granted. May not this be attributed to the fact that the same persons who are called Christian are also members of the secular society, and subject to all the pressures, seductions and intimidations of the morality of mutuality and the politics of power? They are, furthermore, if the Christian view of man be correct, subject to the temptations to selfishness arising





from those anxieties unique to man because of his nature. Their saving grace is their link with and continuing loyalty to the source of agape, which creates within them that redeeming tension, drawing them, at least part of the time, to introduce agape into their participation in the world of practical political considerations and mutualism. It is their relationship to the irrational, illogical, impractical source of agape that makes the difference.

If, in the face of the cynical endorsement of political and mutual moralities as the way of life, anyone is to make a witness, give leadership, and leaven the lump of man's corporate life, will it likely be those who are the product of the cynical process, or those whose deepest loyalties are given to an Eternal, in which they believe not because of some anticipated reward, but because "by faith" it has been revealed to them that this is man's fulfillment and here he should stand?

This is the substance of the argument: that good, efficient and well-intentioned though secular education may be, it is missing something vital when it is cut off from the Christian Church, and is vulnerable and impotent in the face of the forces that can be brought to bear on it. Education will continue to be moral development. Nevertheless, one might hope that, through reasonable cooperation and communication with the fellowship that acknowledges not only that man is anxious sinner but also child of God, the school might better be able to foster that type of moral development which would enable its children to grow towards that worthy fulfillment which man's nature suggests is his potential and his destiny.

### Conclusions

If the argument of this dissertation has any merit, the secular school system is in the throes of a deepening dilemma. By the very nature of education, moral development is part of the process. As society changes, the school is left with ever-increasing moral responsibilities and commitments. Because inadequate family life is reflected in school adjustment, the school is drawn ever more deeply into the moral concerns of the children. While much is done to meet these needs, in the final analysis, this is a task for which the secular school is constitutionally inadequate. The vital, redemptive ingredient of agape is not a part of secularism, is not a criterion of the society which supports the school, and can enter the school only in the footsteps of understanding teachers. Even with the





best of intentions, neither school nor church can bring one another the direct aid each needs from the other.

Few would argue with the statement that moral development ultimately is the home's responsibility. Unfortunately, however, this responsibility and privilege is not always carried out. The school has to cope with many children who are confused and disturbed because they come from homes that are inadequate, unfortunate and unhappy. In the nature of the case, these same disorganized homes do not have a vital church connection from which to draw help. By law, though, the children of all families attend school. Thus, the school may be the only stable social agency with which the family has contact. This throws a burden upon the school which cannot be escaped. So do the responsibilities of the school for moral development increase, not by design, but because of social causes beyond the school's control. While the school may help the child, it can only reach so far into the home. Thus, with responsibility comes also frustration.

The commonly heard proposal for "religion in the schools," usually interpreted to mean special periods for the teaching of special courses, does not appear to be a very fruitful or practical approach. At various junctures in the dissertation, the reasons for this have emerged. Ministers could not do the job. Most are overworked as it is, and some would not bring a proper objectivity. Many teachers are not qualified, either academically or personally. Some teachers might be willing, but others, for their own reasons, would not wish to teach such a course. The pluralistic nature of our society, reflected in the pluralism of churches and religions, presents a chaotic situation out of which it would be next to impossible to bring agreement upon course content and methodology. Christian life, as a vital factor, is not something that can be taught as a subject. Not only would such an attempt be bad educational procedure, it would also be an inappropriate manner in which to spread the gospel. This is not done by formal lessons to a captive audience. Political considerations also enter in, counselling separation of church and state in education in such a way that neither may dominate nor manipulate the other.

It may be argued, and with justification, that the initial responsibility for the proclamation and living of agape rests with the church. Poor





performance here has led many, because of their concern for the implementation of agape, to grow impatient with the institution and to seek other avenues of expression. This does not alter the connection of agape with gospel and Church. It would appear that there can be no real substitute for the work which the church should do in teaching and evangelism. With the church-state relationship what it is, there remains one fair and effective way in which the church can make its influence felt legitimately in education. That is by the work and influence of individual Christians in the educational system.

A study of Niebuhr's elucidation of the many points at which Christianity has a bearing on modern life suggests that any realistic conclusion will be complex, and that arbitrary over-simplification will work injustice upon one viewpoint or another. While the wisdom of the functional and administrative separation of church and school appears justified, the domination of the school by secularist philosophy does not. This creates a paradoxical situation which would become a deadlock were it not for the possibility of individuals as individuals to move freely from one context to the other and to achieve in themselves and through their actions the necessary synthesis. In the society of today there is no place where one can find a clearly distinguished division between two groups of people, one labelled Christian and the other secularist. While some individuals may be so categorized, in the majority of instances the dividing line runs not between people, but right through the middle of persons. The same individual feels the influence of both Christianity and secularism in his life and has a partial allegiance to each. This is not hypocrisy, but is the way the world is constituted. It is incumbent upon the mature individual to see that there is proper communication between the two aspects of his personality and the two respective spheres of his life, that his secular thought and experience and his religious convictions keep each other realistic and in balance. Here the synthesis can take place.

If the democratic professions of our society mean anything, surely they mean just this: that everyone who has a particular insight, viewpoint or understanding to contribute to the common good is not only at liberty to do so but, as a good citizen, is under moral obligation to speak his mind and make his contribution. This is the privilege of everyone, including those whose insights and understandings of life draw their nurture from the





Judaeo-Christian culture and the prophetic-Biblical faith through which that culture finds articulate expression. This means that, where public education is concerned, through curriculum, classroom and counselling, the way is open for persons who are moved by the cogency and urgency of the prophetic-Biblical view of human nature and destiny to make the contribution commensurate with the vitality of their own faith and the strength of their own conviction.

Thus, in a situation which otherwise seems to be in a permanent state of deadlock and frustration, the one factor amenable to change is the educator, be he curriculum planner, teacher or counsellor. The educational, cultural and political considerations making for separation of church and school do not show signs of altering materially in the foreseeable future. Flexibility, compromise and synthesis are possible, however, in the thinking and actions of the people who formulate and implement educational programs and who deal directly with the lives of students. The breaking of the church-state deadlock in education is dependent upon the development of teachers in whose own lives the deadlock has been broken, persons in whose own minds there are open channels of communication between their experience of secular society and their religious evaluation of life. It is incumbent upon the persons who operate the system to bridge the gap and to do it first of all in themselves.

This, then, is the suggested solution. It is a solution which, it may be argued, already is working well where it is being implemented. It is the presence on curriculum committees, in classrooms and in counselling offices of professional persons who understand the prophetic-Biblical interpretation of life, and relate it intelligently, positively and pervasively to the curriculum and to the student. The so-called "neutral" scholar, teacher or counsellor is a mythological character. If one interpretation of life is not being expressed, another is, no matter how subtly. There is no ground for the assumption that a secular educational system must be staffed by secularists. Indeed, if objectivity is a virtue to be cherished amongst educators, the prophetic-Biblical interpretation of human nature and destiny, as Niebuhr presents it, would appear to open up vistas of objectivity and perspectives upon humility without which the educational system is much poorer and the educator much less worthy of his task.

This proposal closes the door on no one, and prevents no other person





or point of view from seeking representation and contributing to the common venture of education. As the study of Niebuhr has shown, Christianity does have a vital contribution to make to human moral development in the educational as well as other contexts. In the future it may be assumed that many different interests will endeavor to influence the shaping of the curriculum. The presence on curriculum committees of persons who understand the prophetic-Biblical view of history would serve as a stabilizing influence, resisting the subversion of the curriculum by any pressure group and safeguarding the best traditions of scholarship.

What is needed at the curricular level, though, is more than mere defensive and precautionary measures. What is suggested is a rebuilding of the foundations in philosophy and curriculum, not in any partisan way, but on the principle that, as an integral part of our culture and as the faith, either vitally or nominally, of most of the population, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, most broadly interpreted, should be given appropriate emphasis in the curriculum, especially in literature, social studies, music and any other related subject. The more basic reason, of course, for curricular emphasis, is that this material deserves attention on its own merits as an interpretation of life. This in no way prevents the study of any other philosophy, religion or point of view that may be thought to have educational value.

If the type of approach envisaged in this dissertation is to be effective in the classroom, it will depend upon teachers who have the heart of the matter in them. These, in turn, will be the product of church life and university influence calculated to foster understanding and to make for intelligible communication within the individual between hitherto conflicting interests of life. Neither the rigid literalist nor the embittered sceptic is likely to contribute usefully to the synthesis. If the need is met, it will be as a result of conscious effort on the part of leaders both in church and university.

Perhaps most difficult and yet most potentially rewarding is the emerging role of the counsellor. Here the contact more often is with students who have reached some point of frustration and crisis. While the emphasis in counsellor training tends to be almost exclusively psychological, time and experience reveal to the counsellor the inadequacy of this approach. A counsellor so schooled in tentativeness and permissiveness that his views





of human nature and destiny are hypothetical and his view of his own roles and goals shot through with anxiety will not likely bring much help to many students. Perhaps no phase of education stands in greater need of rescue from this futility than does counselling. Once rescued, perhaps none has greater opportunity for usefulness.

The writer suggests that any significant progress in coping with the dilemma in which public education finds itself in its role of moral agent will be initiated at the level of leadership. In view of the analysis of the situation presented in this dissertation, perhaps it is too much to expect even the modest measures suggested. The school system is secular. That it can respond with alacrity to the changing economic scene is demonstrated in the current swing towards technical and vocational education. This change, while appropriate, is also illustrative. Education is very closely tied to the state. Perhaps it is asking too much to expect the functionaries of such a system to show interest in the problem of how to transcend political morality and mutuality. But very many of these same educational leaders are also Christians, some in active communion and others, perhaps "following from afar," but nonetheless following. Sensitive men will feel the conflict and the contradiction in themselves as, against the overwhelming claims of political morality and mutuality, they are reminded of agape. Such men have the opportunity to work in all fairness and professional responsibility so to use their leavening influence that the secular educational system will not be a pagan system. When it is made clear that concern is not for denominational advantage, nor even for church recognition of any sort, but for keeping Christian culture in the curriculum so as to encourage moral development in terms of agape, perhaps even the suspicions and accusations of partisanship will die away. The opposite argument to this is to propose that all who see this vital relevance of agape remain silent and submissive while others shape curriculum, philosophy and youth in the patterns of political morality and prudential mutuality.

It has been suggested that, in view of the many hazards and handicaps attending church-school relations, frustrating the possibility of overt co-operation in a common task in which each should supplement the other, that the best possible point of synthesis is in the lives of individuals who care deeply for the values of both. It is suggested that the educator might combine





two worthy ideals in such a way as to embody and implement the answer to the problem of what to do about moral development as an educational aim. The one already is an educational ideal: the figure of man-as-scientist, working with selfless objectivity in the pursuit of truth, wherever the search may take him. What if man-as-scientist somehow could translate these same honored qualities into the realm of his own values and behavior? What if the objectivity achieved in relation to physical phenomena were transposed into an objectivity concerning himself as seen from the standpoint of the Eternal? What if, through this perspective he were able to achieve an objectivity towards himself and his life of the same quality which characterizes his approach to the physical world through scientific method? What if he were to become sufficiently acquainted with agape to be of use in helping others find in it an answer to the futilities of life? Then, would not such a man, in his own life have achieved the looked-for synthesis? If it be true that, above all else, the personality of the teacher influences young life, then here, surely would be an answer to the question: How shall we cope with the problem of moral development as an educational aim?





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